

Chapter One
Awesome

‘Waltz’ the weary voice of Leroy sighed. ‘Will you stop preening yourself; we have a job to do.’

Leroy was the leader of the guild that Waltz was a part of. Every leader to a guild had a title, a second name by which they went by. Leroy’s was The Clockwork Man, though Waltz had never asked why. Leroy rarely used this name.

‘I’ll be there in a minute’ Waltz answered back without turning. He ran his fingers upwards over his scalp, feeling his hair between his fingers. His hair was shaggy, short on the top and long at the bottom and coloured white-blonde. He frowned at himself, eyebrow raised. ‘Hmmm’ he said to the mirror, absorbing his own image. ‘Sexy.’

‘Waltz!’

‘Alright!’ he snapped, turning away from the mirror. ‘I’m coming....jeez...’

He grabbed his sword as he danced past Leroy, who hovered in the open doorway waiting for him. Waltz charged forwards, prancing down the corridor and leaping up onto the balustrade he slid down the stairs.

When he reached the bottom he slipped and fell on his face.

One of the other younger soldiers stood over him, frowning in displeasure. He opened his mouth to speak.

‘Idiot.’

‘Hey!’ Waltz blurted out jumping to his feet. ‘You shut your face Trevor!’

‘Waltz’ Leroy called to him from the top of the stairs. ‘Keep your voice down. I wish you wouldn’t shout all the time.’

‘It’s not my fault’ Waltz scowled as Leroy descended the stairs. ‘It’s *his* fault for being such an asshat.’

‘Enough’ Leroy barked before another argument could break out. ‘Trevor, go fetch the horses.’

Trevor glared at Waltz.

‘Jerk off’ Trevor mumbled.

‘Ass face’ Waltz mumbled back. He turned quickly to Leroy behind him, smiling sweetly. Leroy returned only a glare.

‘So when do we go?’ Waltz asked him casually.

Leroy continued to glare at him for several seconds before deciding to answer

‘We would have left an hour ago’ he said, ‘if you hadn’t been goofing around.’

‘I want the ladies to notice me’ Waltz shrugged slyly.

‘We have a job to do’ Leroy told him sternly.

‘Doesn’t mean we can’t have fun along the way’ Waltz gleamed.

Leroy glared at him.

‘Fine!’ Waltz submitted, throwing his hands in the air. ‘Jeez you’re such a kill joy. If I didn’t know better’ he went on, ‘I’d say you were gay....hey maybe that makes sense...after all there are only men in our guild...twelve of them at that...you’re surrounded by men all day’ Waltz continued to muse as his mind began to wander. ‘Maybe I should watch myself around

you. You're not secretly in love with me are you? You're not touching me in my sleep are you?'

'Get bent.'

The door to the guesthouse opened suddenly then, banging back off the wall.

'Hey!' Earnest, one of their guild members said. 'Are we going or what?'

'Be right there!' Waltz called, turning and waving jovially to him. He strode towards the door, pausing and leaning towards Earnest, whispering into his ear. 'Watch yourself around Leroy' he warned him. 'I think he wants to touch you.'

'What?' Earnest said shortly.

'I'll meet you outside!' Waltz said back to them both, skipping through the door and swinging his arms as he went. 'Boy look at that! It's such a nice day! Look at the sun! Isn't it beautiful? And boy that sky is blue. Look at the sky, it's so purdy!'

Earnest stared after him, frowning in confusion.

'Weirdo...'

Waltz mounted one of the available horses. None of them were his unfortunately, his guild were not well off enough to own such things. These horses were rented, their weapons at least they owned.

'Hiyah!' Waltz shouted, waving his sword in the air as his horse pranced around beneath him.

'Onwards and upwards! Let's kill this suckaahhh!'

'Waltz!'

He flinched as Leroy barked at him, and like a well trained dog he listened (this time at least).

'You're going the wrong way' Leroy told him, glaring at him still. A permanent expression it seemed when he was around Waltz.

'Oh' Waltz grinned sheepishly, wheeling his horse around and sending it tearing in the other direction. 'Let's kill this suckaahhh!'

One by one the other members of his guild followed after him, their horses moving at a trot.

But not all twelve members followed.

Kenneth waited on the ground, listening to the sound of the rest of his guild moving away.

'We'll be back as soon as we can' Leroy told him hanging back. 'We shouldn't be too long on this one.'

'Ok' Kenneth answered nodding. 'Stay safe.'

Leroy flicked his reigns, tapping the heels of his horse and sending it after the others.

Kenneth turned around, and made his way back to the house, walking slowly with his hands out before him, feeling the air as he went.

Waltz rode ahead of the group, whooping happily and punching his fist into the air. The other members of the guild rode a short distance behind him. He ran his horse back and forth until it grew tired, then annoyed. Eventually the horse reared, tossing its rider from its back.

Waltz tumbled off the steed with a dramatic wail, landing in a deep puddle of mud.

The guild members around him began to cackle.

'Serves you right' Kennedy said trotting up to him and leaning forwards in his saddle.

He reached down to Waltz, extending his hand as if to help him up.

Waltz, squinting through the mud over his eyes, waving blindly as he reached for Kennedy's extended hand. Kennedy whipped his hand back just as Waltz went to grab it, falling forwards again into the mud.

The other guild members that had surrounded him now howled in laughter. One of the other members sent his horse after Waltz's, grabbing the reigns and bringing it back.

'Here' Tom said, offering the reigns of the grumpy horse back to him.

Waltz rose to his feet again, slipping; then falling backwards, into the mud again.

'Come on!' Leroy called loudly down to him. 'We haven't got all day.'

'We're nearly there!' Waltz hollered back, wiping the mud from his eyes.

'I think it's an improvement' one of them giggled.

'Shut your face Trevor!' Waltz snapped.

Waltz fumbled for his horse, stumbling as the creature tried to move away.

He mounted the horse again, covered from head to toe in thick, sticky-dark mud, with only a thin strip of him visible where he had wiped the mud from his eyes.

His horse which had grown tired now, walked behind the other horses from that point onwards. As Waltz went along, he tried his best to clean the mud from him, doing a poor job of it.

'Ach' he winced uncomfortably. 'It's in my pants and everything!'

Minutes later they reached their destination. A natural spring where the water ran hot from deep below the earth, the rocks which surrounded the spring were smooth, and the water itself was crystal clear.

Normally there would be women bathing here, scattered about the spring in various degrees of nakedness.

Waltz's eyes glazed over at the thought.

'What's with that look?' Kennedy asked from beside him. 'You're starting to creep me out.'

'Oh' Waltz said snapping back to himself. 'Nothing. Everything's fine.'

Kennedy frowned at him unconvinced, though he couldn't read Waltz's expression clearly through all the mud that still covered him.

They reached the spring, and all the woman who would usually be bathing, were gathered in a small group at the edge of the water.

'Oh thank god you're here!' one of the woman cried, rushing up to the soldiers. 'We thought we would die for sure!'

The soldiers dismounted, leaving their horses behind as they approached the women.

'Where is it?' Leroy demanded, looking into the woman's eyes.

The woman who had first spoken averted her gaze, her eyes shimmering as she stared to the ground. 'We were so frightened.' She moaned, hugging herself, squeezing her breasts together as she did so, the towel she wore slipping down, barely covering her. 'We simply could not defend ourselves against such a thing.'

'Where?' Leroy said impatiently.

'It was so scary' another woman spoke, a blonde haired woman who looked like a goddess, dressed only in pink underwear with her chest practically spilling out. 'It was a monster!'

Leroy sighed wearily.

'Don't worry ladies!' Waltz called to them, shoving the other guild members to the side and pushing his way to the front of the group. 'I'll save you!'

Everything went quiet then. The women all stared at him in surprise.

A glob of mud slid down his face and splat to the floor.

‘A hero!’ one of the women cried prancing up to him, casting her arms out as she drew closer. ‘A knew a hero would come to us!’

The towel she had held up slipped from her body and fell. Beneath she was completely naked, wearing not a single thread.

Waltz stared down, mouth open and eyes like dinner plates.

His head began to spin, and he wobbled on the spot. His body hunched over then as he held his nose which began to bleed.

‘Where is the monster?’ Leroy asked the woman patiently, bending down to pick up the towel and handing it back to her.

‘Thank you sir’ the woman said, taking her towel back as Waltz pulled at his own collar, gasping and panting and fanning himself. ‘It’s in the middle of the spring’ she said to him. ‘It’s waiting for you.’

Leroy strode past her; the other member of the guild followed him, heading to the centre of the spring.

Leroy backtracked suddenly, grabbing Waltz by the collar and jerking him backwards, pulling him away from the women he gawked at.

‘Don’t worry!’ he called back to them as he was dragged away. ‘I’ll vanquish this beast!’

Leroy only let go of him when they had rounded the corner, once the beautiful, busty, mostly-naked women were out of sight.

‘God’ Leroy huffed, rounding on him as he let go of Waltz, wiping his muddy hand on his trousers. ‘We have a job to do here. Will you keep it in your pants for just *one* day?’

Waltz was about to give a sarcastic comment when his voice was cut short. Instead of forming a sentence, he pointed to the monster behind Leroy and gave a girly screech.

The rest of the guild now stood facing the monster. It was a thing covered all in shadow, with no distinguishing features. It looked kind of like a dragon, if you squinted really hard.

The dragon-thing (or whatever it was) moved its snake-like neck towards the men, pulling its body towards them with only two legs (or arms, or whatever they were).

‘Get in formation!’ Leroy ordered his men. ‘Circle this beast. I don’t want it escaping.’

‘I’ll take it down!’ Waltz called, drawing forth his sword, having recovered from the initial shock of being startled by the sight of it. ‘Leave it to me!’

‘Waltz stop! Stay with the group!’

Waltz ignored Leroy’s cries, instead charging towards the beast with all the speed he could muster and throwing himself off the rock, drawing his sword back ready to strike it.

Instead of hitting anything solid he simply fell through it, landing unceremoniously in the water.

A moment of silence ensued, (it was beautiful) before Waltz re-surfaced, coughing and spluttering after having swallowed some of the water.

‘Hey’ he said speaking through the black smoky body of the beast, ‘it’s not so bad in here. It’s actually rather pleasant.’

‘Waltz!’ Tom called to him. ‘Get out of there!’

‘Why?’ he called back. ‘I’m perfectly safe. If I can’t touch it, then it can’t touch me...right?’

It was at that moment (as if the beast understood) that the creature put its foot (or hand) upon his head, pushing him below the surface.

Waltz began to thrash around, arms flailing in the air as he fought for breath.

On the edge of the spring, Leroy let out a weary sigh.

He turned his back to the beast that was completely ignoring them, and began rummaging around in his pockets.

‘Now...’ he mused to himself. ‘Where did I put that thing?’

‘Uh...anytime Leroy’ Earnest said nearby. ‘Waltz is...you know...sort of drowning...?’

Leroy glanced lazily over to him. ‘Oh’ he said, without elaborating. ‘Give me a second.’

He continued to search. ‘Where where where.....?’

The other members of the guild watched him with exasperation. Behind them Waltz was still thrashing around, held down by the beast intent on drowning him, he was splashing as much as possible. Only his hands were visible at this point, flailing uselessly about, just above the surface.

‘Jeez...’ Kennedy said watching him. ‘Even when he’s dying he’s annoying.’

‘Here we are’ Leroy said, at long last finding what he was looking for. A little red and blue stone, within which held a spell.

He cast it into the water and the beast hissed suddenly as if in pain, drawing sharply back. Beneath its limb (foot or hand) Waltz was finally able to come up for air.

‘Nice one arse bandit!’ he called, balling his fist and making rude gestures towards Leroy in a hysterical and furious manner.

‘Everyone!’ Leroy commanded, as Waltz continued to blurt out obscenities. ‘Draw out your spells, this creature is weak against magic!’

The ten members of the guild all drew out their spell-bound crystals, moving around to circle the beast as Leroy approached it head on.

The creature was slow to react, but as Waltz gazed up at it from the water where he remained, he saw its wings growing larger from its back, lifting high above its smoky body as if about to take off.

‘It’s trying to escape!’ Waltz squawked pointing at it as it hovered above his head, floating above the water. ‘Somebody do something!’

‘You’re nearest’ Leroy shot back, drawing forth an arrow and tying a string of beads to the shaft. ‘*You* do something.’

Waltz scrambled through the water away from the beast, coming up onto dry land and hauling himself to his feet.

He rose now, completely clean, all the mud and filth washed from him, his white-blonde shaggy hair was soaked and hanging limp.

He tied several magical gems to his sword, swinging it around several times by the red cloth wound around the hilt, before throwing it through the air and towards the beast of shadow.

His aim struck its mark, and he managed to cut the beast right at the base of one of the wings. The creature turned its snake-like head towards him; its wing he had cut off was instantly beginning to grow back.

Waltz started back in shock at this, seeing the head open its jaws as it went for him.

‘Oh Shi-’

It grabbed him before could finish his sentence, lifting him up and tossing him in the air.

‘WWWWAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!’

‘Why is it not working?’ Tom asked glaring at the monster.

Waltz fell through the air, landing in the water for the second time.

The monster grabbed him roughly and threw him again, tossing him this time to the side, all the while ignoring the other members of the guild who were attacking it with their crystals.

‘It’s no use’ Trevor huffed. ‘Each time we hurt it, it seems to become immune to our next attack.’

‘Hmmm’ Leroy frowned, pulling out a bestiary from his person and flipping the book open.

‘Let’s have a look shall we?’

‘Oh you’ve got to be kidding me!!!’ Waltz said as he watched Leroy leaf through the book, before the monster grabbed him again and tossed him to the other side, throwing him against the wall of the cliff before them.

Waltz landed in an awkward sprawl upon the floor, limbs a tangled mess.

He let out a breath and uttered a word.

‘...Ow....’

The shadowy mass grabbed him again.

‘Is this the right one?’ Earnest said, moving closer to Leroy and looking over his shoulder.

Gradually the other guild members surrounded Leroy, each peering over the others heads to get a look at the book.

‘Perhaps silver’ one of them suggested.

‘Nah that’s mainly for undead or cursed.’

‘How do you know it’s not cursed?’

‘Nah. It looks serpentine. How about piercing the heart?’

‘Where is its heart?’

They all paused to glance up at the thing, which was now beginning to chew Waltz in its gummy maw.

‘Nah’ one of them said. ‘To pierce the heart it needs a solid form.’

They all mumbled in agreement.

‘Any time you guys!’ Waltz cried out to them.

‘Shush!’ Leroy said loudly, speaking his next sentence quieter. ‘You’re breaking my concentration.’

‘Oh to hell with this!’ Waltz in one swift move reached into his belt, pulling from it a white stone, combining its magic with several others from his coat-pockets and mashing them all together as one. ‘And god said...’ he began, ‘...let there be light!’

There was a sudden and blinding flash of holy white light, and the guild nearby were suddenly enveloped in a radiant glow, so strong they were temporarily blinded.

When the light faded, the beast was out of sight, along with Waltz.

He surfaced seconds later; having fallen back in the water after the beast vanished.

‘Light!’ Leroy breathed. ‘It’s so obvious!’

‘Yeah’ Waltz said, crawling out of the spring *again* and dusting himself down casually as if nothing has happened. ‘Even *I* figure *that* out. Stupid twink.’

He climbed upon the tall rock at the head of the spring, so that he overlooked all that was around him. From here he could see the entire spring, and the women who waited just out of view of the other guild members.

‘Come on ladies, come and enjoy the water!’ he called to them. ‘The beast has been vanquished!’

The women raised their heads, running towards the spring. They ran past the guild members gathered around Leroy (who still held his book and was now wearing an expression of boredom) and towards Waltz.

They climbed upon the rocks and surrounded him.

‘A hero! A hero!’

‘You saved us!’

‘How can we ever repay you?’

Waltz drew a slow intake of breath as the women flanked him, all reaching out to touch him, to fawn over him.

Waltz began to feel dizzy as he felt their large breasts push against his body. He grinned widely at the world around him, drawing forth his sword and raising it high up into the air crying ‘YEAH! I’M ON TOP OF THE WOOOOORLD!’

His chest began to glow then, and he looked down at himself in shock.

‘Oh no....’ he mumbled to himself. ‘Not again...not now...’

His profile faded away as he was forcibly teleported, away from this wonderful place, and back to *her*.

When the light faded, he found himself in a dark home, standing before the witch.

Waltz immediately sheathed his sword and dropped to a knee.

‘What order would you have me do this time my master?’ he spoke.

The witch sneered down at him.

Chapter Two

Not so Great

Today his master took the form of a beautiful woman with long white-blonde wavy hair, pale skin that was perfect like porcelain, and shockingly bright blue eyes.

‘Waltz’ she oozed. ‘I have a job for you.’

‘Well I doubt you summoned me for my company’ Waltz replied. ‘Though most women want more than just my company’ he added slyly.

‘You’re childish humour is wasted on me’ the witch sneered as Waltz rose to his feet again. ‘I would appreciate it if you would desist.’

Waltz glanced at the room around him. The witch’s hut was a crowded place, one of many where she worked and lived. Some of her other homes were more lavish, larger, and more expensive.

Here was a fairly modest build in size, situated in a forest so deep; one would die of starvation before finding it.

Inside, it was dark and cluttered and dimly lit, every available space was filled by some ingredient needed for a potion or spell, bottles of strange liquids, items both blessed and

cursed, even some caged animals, all of which were completely silent and almost completely still.

Upon a perch was a slender hawk, there was a fat green frog imprisoned in a glass bottle with a round body and a tall narrow neck, several mice sitting upon the shelf seemingly free though they remained where they were, and a small tank on the floor, filled with newts.

Waltz had been summoned to this hut before. He hated it, and he hated all the creepy animals. They weren't natural, and didn't behave how animals should.

The millions of spiders hanging in the rafters didn't help either. Waltz hunched his shoulders, glancing up at the rafters and hoping none of the tiny spiders fell on him.

Spiders. They were the thing he hated most. The way they moved and scuttled...he found them *freaky*.

'There is something I have lost and wish to be returned to me' the witch continued.

'What is it?' Waltz asked, trying to ignore the fat green frog stuck in the glass bottle.

It was staring at him, staring and staring.

Waltz hunched his shoulders further, gritting his teeth and feeling ever more uncomfortable.

It's like the frog knew what he was thinking!

'Are you listening to me?' the witch asked him, wearing an expression of extreme displeasure.

'I'm sorry?' Waltz stammered.

The witch frowned even harder.

'My seal' she repeated. 'I have lost it' she told him. 'Someone has taken it from me, and I wish to have it back.'

The next thing that Waltz knew, he was standing in the pouring rain late at night, sulking beneath his wide-brimmed hat and long trench coat.

'This sucks' Waltz grumbled to himself. 'This is exactly the *opposite* to where I want to be.'

He shivered then as a trickle of icy cold water ran down his spine.

'Well' he mumbled, 'I guess I better get going.'

He walked down the busy street with his head bowed and hands in his pockets, moving slowly through the crowd.

It was dark all around him; the gloom was only broken by the gentle orange glow of the lanterns that hung from the buildings flanking either side of him.

Waltz's eyes flickered up to the tower he headed to, before returning to the ground to watch his feet splashing through the puddles as he walked.

'Oh god it's so cold...'

He came to the end of the street, reaching out for the door to the building which was his destination.

He stepped inside, breathing a sigh of relief.

It was warm inside, and Waltz glanced enviously at the merry bands of men sitting around the tables in the warm firelight nearby, laughing heartily and raising the tankards into the air as they leant against one another in their drunkard state.

Oh sweet bliss... Waltz thought as he watched the ale slosh around the tankards and spill upon the table. *What I wouldn't give to taste that sweet liquid heaven...*

He turned away sharply, glaring at nothing in particular.

‘My life sucks!’

He moved away, climbing the spiral staircase concealed in a dark corner of the room, it was practically invisible.

He trudged upwards glumly, thinking about all the awesome things he was going to do once this job was over.

Drinking, he thought. *Lots of drinking, women...women with drinks...women who feed me drinks...*

He reached the top of the stairs and used his skeleton key (given to him by that ghastly witch) to open the door.

The door swung inwards.

Inside was an office. It was a standard office, with all the features an office should have with the usual books and desk and blah blah blah.

Waltz saw the seal sitting upon the desk right in the middle as if waiting for him, as if it had been placed there for him to find.

He stomped sulkily up to it, snatching it up and glaring at it, as if his current discomfort and annoyance was all its fault.

‘Stupid thing’ Waltz glowered.

It was long and rectangle in shape, with a round handle at one end and a small depiction carved into the base at the other end.

He shoved it in his pocket.

‘Job done.’

He turned towards the door and stepped towards it. Suddenly and without warning the door slammed shut.

Waltz faltered, blinking in surprise as he stared at the door.

‘Hu...that’s strange...’

He walked up to it, grabbing the doorknob. He drew back sharply, hissing under his breath.

Waltz turned his hand over, and saw his palm was already beginning to bluster.

He had been burned.

‘What the hell?’

The doorknob was red hot.

Waltz cursed under his breath, glaring at the closed exit before him.

‘Magic’ he hissed.

He waited for a moment, as if he expected something else to happen, like a trap of some sorts being sprung. Perhaps he would fall through the floor into a filthy dungeon below. Or a heavy boulder would fall on his head, and snuff his life out forever.

But nothing happened, and so he turned to the only other exit in the room.

The window.

He opened it and leant out, feeling instantly the chill and rain whip his face

Great he thought glumly, before climbing out. *Just my luck.*

In no time at all, he was soaking wet, and couldn’t feel his fingers as he climbed higher, fumbling for the cracks in the stone as he struggled to get a foothold.

How did it come to this?! He thought desperately to himself, as he clambered to the top of the tower, reaching the balcony and haling himself over.

He breathed a sigh of relief once he was back on solid ground again.

‘There’ he said rubbing his hands together. ‘Easy.’

He tensed then, seeing a silhouette clinging to the shadows beneath the roof of the tower that continued above them.

‘Hey!’ Waltz called out. ‘Who are you?’

The figure turned, tipping his hat back so that Waltz could see his face.

‘Sydney?!’

The figure named Sydney smiled. ‘Hello brother. Fancy seeing you here.’

Waltz glowered. ‘I was here first.’

‘I thought we were working together’ Sydney replied, stepping closer to him and hunching his shoulders against the rain. ‘Isn’t that what brothers do?’

‘So the witch sent you on this pointless task too?’ Waltz asked. ‘I got the seal by the way’ he said revealing it.

‘It doesn’t look like much’ Sydney replied gazing down at the long rectangle shape, with its round handle and carved base.

‘Appearances can be deceiving’ Waltz answered. ‘It’s probably magical or something.’

They both shrugged at that.

‘What’re you doing here anyway?’ Waltz asked Sydney.

‘Chasing the bad guy.’

‘Where is he?’ Waltz asked him.

It was then at that precise moment, that the door to the balcony opened, and a figure looking positively livid with rage, stormed through.

‘Oh hey’ Sydney said, turning towards the figure and smiling. ‘There you are.’

‘If I remember correctly’ the figure spat at Sydney, ‘it was I who was chasing you!’

‘Then why did you run away?’

‘I was getting prepared’ he retorted. ‘Unlike the two of you, I cannot transform without my potion. Which I have now. Haha! Be prepared!’

He made a big demonstration in producing it from his person and drinking it, doing so in a dramatic fashion, doing so as quickly as possible as if he thought the brothers might try to stop him, which they didn’t.

They simply watched him, both wearing the same bored expressions as they waited for the potion to take effect.

‘And that’s not all!’ the man said triumphantly, as if he had already won the battle. ‘Look what I have here’ he said producing the seal that Waltz had, not a moment ago, had in his pocket.

‘How did you do that?!’ Waltz exclaimed.

‘Aha!’ the man said knowingly. ‘Magic!’

‘Oh please’ both of the brothers scoffed.

‘Magic?’ Waltz said. ‘That is the lamest excuse in the book. You may as well say that God did it.’

‘Oh’ the man said suddenly, ‘it’s about to happen. I hope you’re ready!’

Sydney placed his hands upon his hips, shaking his head wearily.

‘Here we go again....’

The man (whose name was Bart by the way) dropped the vial, his body hunched over as he hugged himself.

He began to transform then, right before their very eyes.

His skin turned to scales and wings grew from his back.

In no moment at all, he had transformed into a wyvern. A slender beast with scales that gleamed a bright sapphire blue, with large wings, a narrow head, an unnaturally long forked tongue, and a great orange crest that rang along his back.

‘Yes yes’ Sydney nodded dully. ‘Very impressive.’

‘Now’ the wyvern (named Bart) hissed at them. ‘Try to kill me, or else I will kill both of you and take the seal forever.’

‘It’s actually not your seal’ Waltz kindly pointed out.

The wyvern (named Bart) did not answer. He crouched his body low, throwing his mighty blue wings into the sky and taking off.

‘Come on then’ Sydney huffed, nudging Waltz beside him who had begun to doze off, sleeping where he stood.

‘Wah!’ Waltz said suddenly, snapping back to reality. ‘Oh.’ He ran his fingers through his shaggy white-blond hair. ‘Alright....’ He sighed wearily. ‘The sooner we get this over with...’

Sydney threw his head back then, a suddenly white glow enveloping him, a strong breeze swirling around him causing his hair to lift.

He transformed into a great beast with a body a dirty blue colour, and what looked like large fins for hands that he held parallel to the horizon, using these magical tools to lift himself higher in the air, and shooting after Bart (the wyvern) with jaws gaping.

Waltz’s body began to glow, and his profile changed quickly, whipping around as he took on a snake-like form, but giant in size. His skin was black and shabby looking, he had a large mouth at his head and many teeth.

He shot upwards through the air, moving rapidly after his brother as they together pursued Bart.

They caught up to him in no time.

Bart wheeled around to fight when he realised he could not escape them, sinking his long teeth into Sydney’s soft flesh.

Waltz was upon him in an instant, grabbing Bart, biting down hard and tossing him through the air, away from his brother. Sydney’s wound bled profusely, but he acted as if he didn’t even notice as he moved closer to Bart again.

Bart, who had been thrown against the roof of the nearest building, suddenly righted himself. Turning to both of them and roaring, mouth wide open. From the back of his throat came a glowing beam of light which enveloped both Sydney and Waltz as they tore towards him through the sky. Waltz slowed in the air, his snake-like body cringing and writhing as it hung above the town.

But that particular spell Bart had used had no effect against Sydney, and in no time at all Sydney was upon him, slowing in the air just before he reached Bart and tilting his head back so that his body faced him. Sydney’s large fins then closed around Bart, who began to howl furiously.

He threw Bart up in the air suddenly, having weakened him, Bart could do nothing but flail around as he gained height.

Waltz having righted himself took opportunity in this moment, soaring through the air, his body snaking back and forth as he went. His jaws dislocated and opened wide, much like a natural snake's would do, and he swallowed Bart whole.

Bart's muffled wails could be heard inside him as he slid down Waltz's throat.

Waltz descended in the air, twisting his body around and around until his belly touched the roof of the building below him.

Nearby, Sydney had transformed back into his human self, running along the rooftops towards his brother.

'Waltz?'

Waltz remained facing away from Sydney with his head hung. A few seconds later his body began to glow, as he transformed back to his regular self.

Waltz suddenly turned to him, retching and making a scene.

'Bleeeceaaaaahhhh!' he declared rubbing his throat. 'Gross.'

'I can't believe you ate him' Sydney said flatly with an eyebrow raised.

'At least I got the seal' Waltz said with a smug grin. His expression turned serious then. 'Oh god...here it comes...'

He doubled over then, retching and covering his mouth with both hands.

He was suddenly violently sick into both his hands, straightening then when it was over.

'Ha!' he said triumphantly, lifting up the seal he had thrown up. 'Success!'

The seal (and both of his hands) were covered in gore. Blood and flesh all liquid and disgusting...with bits of something white which at a glance might have been bone...it might have been teeth.

'Uh...' Sydney spoke reluctantly. 'You can hold onto that until we get back.'

Waltz slipped the seal into his pocket, rubbing his hands on his trousers then straightening, grinning widely at his brother.

'How about a drink before we go back?' he suggested.

'Oh I don't think so' came an all too familiar voice.

Waltz suppressed a groan as he turned then to an owl that had suddenly perched on his shoulder. A little owl, that spoke in the same way as the witch he was bound to did.

But he knew it was not the witch. She could change form, but could only change into a human form. She used many different animals she kept to speak through and to use to spy on people, but she could not *become* the animal.

'You're to return to me immediately' the witch told him, speaking through the little owl.

'Give the seal back to me...but not before you clean it first.'

Waltz watched the little owl with a flat expression as it took off again, flying away.

'Well you heard her' Sydney said turning his back on him and marching in the opposite direction. 'Let's go.'

'Awww this sucks' Waltz complained. 'She always spoils all the fun...'

He sighed heavily; shoulders slumped, before plodding on after his brother, running after him across the rooftops through the rain.

Chapter Three
A Freaky Noise

‘There.’ Waltz said shortly, dumping the seal on the table before the witch. ‘One seal. Can we go now?’

The witch gave Waltz a scrutinizing look. A slight sneer played about her lips, and an eyebrow raised, as she leant forwards to study the seal.

Today the witch had adopted another form, as she did nearly every time they met. Today she had long wavy hair, strong blue eyes and tanned skin.

‘Good’ she said straightening up again. Though she didn’t touch the seal. She left it where it was on the table between them. ‘You’ve completed your task.’

‘Great’ Waltz said sarcastically. ‘Can you teleport me back now please?’

She gave him a look of disgust. His brother standing close by sighed wearily with exasperation.

‘I will take you where I please’ the witch told him. ‘When I please.....I do not answer your command.’

Waltz gave her a bored expression, scratching the back of his head as the witch cast her magic over both he and his brother.

They were both enveloped in a blinding white light. When at last it faded, they found themselves in a meadow. The grass grew tall and dark, the light in the sky was fading, and the forest in the distance was foreboding.

‘Stupid cow!’ Waltz shouted, kicking the grass around him to release his anger. ‘This is not where I want to be.’

‘Calm yourself brother’ Sydney told him patiently.

Waltz grabbed handfuls of the tall grass, ripping it from the ground and throwing it away in fury, stopping only when he was exhausted.

Waltz breathed heavily, shoulders heaving and skin prickled with sweat.

He cursed under his breath, straightening and wiping his brow with the back of his hand.

When he turned around next, he saw his brother was gone.

‘Yeah well thanks for nothing Sydney’ Waltz glowered to the meadow around him.

He shook his head, gazing about him and turning slowly on the spot, wondering which way he should go.

He saw some lights in the distance.

‘A town?’ Waltz said, squinting and leaning forwards. ‘Is that a town?’

He straightened again, shrugging to himself.

‘This way I suppose.’

He tensed suddenly, wheeling around at the sound of a strange howl coming from the woods behind him. He travelled this world often, his journeys taking him near and far.

He knew better than most the strange creatures that shared this land with him.

He turned his back on the sound, scratching at his sweaty palms.

Waltz took his first step forwards, wading through the tall grass of the meadow. He paused before the forest before him, the forest that surrounded the meadow.

There was no other way out, he had to cross the dark woods.

Waltz took a deep breath, willing himself to be strong.
'Well' he mumbled to himself. 'Here goes nothing.'
He stepped forwards, into the darkness.

Chapter Four

A Good Day

Waltz found his guild nearly a week later.

By the time he emerged from the wilderness, he was a mess. His white-blond hair, which was once white blonde, was now a filthy sort of greyish-brownish colour. His skin, cheeks and arms and hands were smeared with mud, as were his clothes which were covered in grass stains and mud, thick mud which caked him from the knees down.

He emerged from the nearby woods, pulling twigs out of his hair as he approached the inn his guild had been staying in for the last few weeks.

It was a nice day at the moment, and there were several members of his guild scattered about outside the inn which was built in an open space, the town it belonged to was a stone's throw away.

Leroy, the leader of the guild he was a part of, was sitting upon a bench reading a book in the sun.

He turned towards Waltz as he heard him approach, wearing a flat expression.

'Where have you been?' Leroy grumbled.

'Don't start' Waltz ordered him as he trudged forwards.

He stood beside the table which Leroy sat at, scratching furiously at his head, pulling from his shaggy hair a live mouse and tossing it aside, before falling forwards on his face and collapsing on the tabletop.

'Waltz.'

Waltz turned to Leroy, groaning dramatically and dribbling on the table.

'I'm getting fed up with this' Leroy scowled at him. 'Where do you keep going?'

'None of your business' Waltz moaned, the puddle of dribble around his mouth vastly growing.

'Ew' Leroy said, pulling his book away as the puddle of dribble seeped across the table and towards him. 'Stop that.'

'Is that Waltz?' called one of the other guild members. 'Hey guys! Waltz is back.'

Several of the guild members that were outside moved over to him, surrounding the table.

'Are you alright Waltz?' Tristan said leaning over him. 'You look terrible.'

Waltz rolled onto his back. A small squeak suddenly came from his person. A mouse suddenly appeared, climbing from beneath his shirt and scurrying away.

'Where did you go?' Kyle asked him.

'None of your business' Waltz moaned again.

‘Oh’ Barry said, covering his mouth with a hand. ‘You smell terrible. Have you been wading through a bog?’

‘Yeah’ Waltz whimpered pathetically, lip quivering and eyes brimming with tears. ‘Through woods and rivers and caves and swamps and sands and mountains and lakes and....’

‘You should go and have a bath’ Barry told him, as Waltz continued to list all the places he had gone through. ‘A wash would make you feel better. Much better.’ He paused, listening to Waltz as he continued to ramble on about all the horrible places he had been. ‘There are women at the inn who are waiting for you’ he added.

Waltz’s eyes suddenly widened and he quickly closed his mouth.

He leapt up then, running at full speed to his room.

A moment later he re-emerged from the inn, looking like a newly polished coin. His hair which was short on the top and long at the bottom was now clean, and now returned to its original colour, white-blonde as it was supposed to be. His skin was bright pink where he had rubbed it raw, so hard to get the dirt off, and he now wore fresh new clothes.

‘I’m back baby!’ he declared loudly, and the guild members that were outside began to clap loudly for him.

‘It’s good to see you again’ the guild member named Rude smiled to him.

‘Back to his old self’ Richard said, raising the tankard to his lips and drinking.

‘Watch out ladies!’ Waltz said balling his fist. ‘Here I come!’

The very next morning, Leroy raised the bucket above his head, throwing it as hard as he could at Waltz.

Waltz woke with a start as the wooden bucket bounced off his head. The women either side of him woke as he jerked awake, sitting up and rubbing their eye wearily.

‘What time is it?’ the red head mumbled.

‘Is it midday yet?’ the blond asked.

‘Hey man!’ Waltz shouted at Leroy. ‘What the hell?!’

‘We’ve got a job to do’ Leroy told him, ignoring the women as they gave him admiring glances. ‘We’re leaving now.’

‘What job?’ Waltz asked him, rising from the bed and beginning to dress quickly.

‘I’ve taken a job from the notice board’ Leroy told him, showing him the piece of paper.

‘There is a griffon causing trouble for a village nearby. We’re going to get rid of it.’

‘How much is the pay?’

‘Not amazing, but decent enough’ Leroy answered, rolling the paper up and returning it to his inner pocket. ‘We need the money this job offers. Hurry up and get ready. The rest of us are waiting downstairs.’

He left the room swiftly.

Waltz cursed under his breath. ‘I just got here’ he complained. ‘Why do I have to leave now?’

‘Must you go?’ the women asked him, stroking his chest seductively. ‘We like you. We want you to stay. Wont you stay?’

‘Sorry ladies’ Waltz told them, putting his boots on. ‘I’ve got a village to save.....it’s not easy being a hero you know.’

He strode from the room, his hair sweeping after him as he went; the women gazed at him with adoring as he left the room.

‘Dammit I thought you said this village was nearby’ Waltz moaned, kicking back his aching feet as they sat around the fire. It was evening.

‘It is nearby’ Leroy scowled at him.

‘We’ve been walking for hours!’

‘Riding a horse doesn’t count as walking’

‘Uhhhhh....’

‘Do you have to be so annoying?’ Barry asked him.

‘Hey Leroy’ Waltz suddenly said to him. ‘I’ve been thinking.....you should write a book.’

‘Why?’

‘I think it would be good for you’ Waltz said, beaming up to the darkening sky. ‘An outlet you might say.’

‘An outlet for what?’ Leroy grumbled.

‘It could be called...Backdoor Party...’

‘What?’

‘The Unexpected Entrance...’

‘Oh.’ Leroy’s expression instantly flattened.

‘Pillow Tears...’ Waltz continued. ‘A naval story called Servicing the Rear Admiral...about a bloke with a tattoo on his arse called admiral...’

‘Alright’ Leroy told him. ‘That’s enough...’

‘It Felt Right...uncomfortable love...’

‘Shut up!’

‘A Sore Story....’

‘I said shut up!’ Leroy snapped at him.

‘The Star of Uranus...’ Waltz continued, completely ignoring him, ‘...about an astrology teacher who’s forty years old...who falls in love with an eight year old, who didn’t want it, but ended up loving it...but it was actually Stockholm syndrome.’

‘Waltz...’

‘Sword Play....’

‘Waltz...;

‘The religious one....The Holy Bone.....where the eight years old choir boy is taken in for confession by a priest...very yaoi...’

‘Waltz...’

‘Forbidden Ring...a true love story...’

‘Waltz...’ Leroy groaned, becoming increasingly more irate.

‘Bad to the Bone!’ Waltz continued. ‘About an eight year old ghost that is molested by a thousand year old necromancer.’

‘WALTZ!’

‘Watch my Tail....a story about gay werewolves.’

Leroy struck him suddenly over the head with a wooden bucket, the nearest thing at hand.

‘Ow!’ Waltz protested. ‘What the hell?!!!’

‘You deserved it’ Leroy said throwing the bucket away and standing over him. ‘I swear I wish I could clone you and lock you in a room with yourself...honestly....’

He sat back down.

The rest of that night passed peacefully, and the eleven guild members slept within the shelter of the trees.

The next morning they woke early.

The sun had not touched the horizon yet, but its light was still flooding the sky.

Waltz looked about him as the other members slowly rose.

They stood in the woods gazing about.

The fairies had come out this morning to greet them. Waltz held his hands out together, as one of them landed softly on his open palms.

He smiled down at the little creature that glowed green, its delicate glass-like wings shining brightly.

‘A good omen’ Waltz smiled. ‘I feel today is going to be a good day.’

Chapter Five

This Couldn’t be Any Worse

‘This couldn’t be any worse!’

Waltz threw his head back, groaning and baring his teeth as he gripped his hair.

‘Oh come on’ Rude said beside him. ‘It’s not that bad.’

‘What?!’ Waltz squeaked. ‘Look at this place!’

Leroy strode past him in brooding silence, gazing about him at the carnage. The simple village they had come to, the houses made of wooden walls and thatched roofs, with wooden fences that stood in the gardens to hold the animals, was almost completely destroyed in parts. It looked like a great beast had crashed into several of the buildings, tearing them apart as if they were made from only paper. Several animals wandered about in confusion, sheep that had once been penned now roamed free, bleating and milling around. Amongst the broken houses, were injured people being care for by other, bearing various different wounds, and here and there, bodies were covered with white cloths.

‘What happened here?’ Leroy asked of an old man, sitting on the steps before one of the broken homes, his own home by the look of it.

‘Are you the heroes who have come to save us?’ the old man asked.

‘We have taken the job’ Leroy replied to the man flatly. ‘We are here to slay the beast.’

‘Oh’ the old man sighed. ‘Thank god. You *have* to kill it. It is an evil creature.’

‘Where is the village leader?’ Leroy asked him.

‘She’s over there’ the old man replied, pointing in one direction.

Leroy nodded to him once, before marching away. The other members of the guild trailing after him.

They found the village leader to be a young woman in her late teens, pretty with scruffy blond hair and dishevelled clothes. She was speaking to several people, dishing out orders and pointing from here to there. Behind her, just outside the village was a small fire, on which a small number of bodies were being burned. Holy figures dressed in modest clothes surrounded the pyre, heads bowed as they chanted their prayers.

‘Thank god we’ve only lost as few as we have’ the village leader was saying to another man. ‘The size of that beast could have made this so much worse.’

‘Excuse me’ Leroy spoke loudly to her.

She turned to him.

‘Are you the village leader?’

She pursed her lips. ‘My father and grandfather have died. I am young, but this is my job now.’ She paused, considering the group. ‘Are you the ones who have taken the job we advertised?’

‘Yes’ Leroy grumbled back.

Behind him, Waltz leant out from the group to get a better look at her.

‘It has been a sad day for all of us. The beast kept coming back. The people are afraid to leave their homes now. Your very presence here brings comfort to the folk.’

As she spoke, young children began to gather around the members of the guild, gazing up at them in wide-eyed wonder. Waltz gazed back, grinning widely. He remembered, what felt like a lifetime ago, being young and full of dreams, just like these children. He had dreamed of being a powerful mage, to be awed and respected and just a little feared.

He was still pursuing that dream...

‘I’m just grateful’ the young village leader was saying. ‘If it was a fire-breathing creature...well...our little wooden village would have been completely destroyed.’

‘Yes’ Leroy replied grimly in a bored tone. ‘We must be grateful for what we have. Now where is the beast?’

‘We do not know. Many of the folk are too scared to work the fields now, we have stayed here in this village together where we feel safer. You have to help us. We cannot live our lives in fear.’

Leroy sighed then, placing his hands on his hips.

‘We will have to search for it ourselves then’ he said. ‘Don’t worry’ he reassured her. ‘We will find it and kill it. Then it will trouble you no more.’

A moment later, all eleven of them were huddled together behind a bush, all facing the same way, all staring outwards through the foliage of the leaves and to the open field on the other side.

‘You call this searching for it?’ Waltz grumbled. ‘We’re just sitting here.’

‘It will come’ Leroy reassured him.

‘Oh yeah?’ Waltz cast a sideways glance at him, glowering. ‘How do you know?’

‘Because’ Leroy said patiently through gritted teeth, ‘that sheep carcass will lure it in.’

‘How do you know it’s still hungry?’ Waltz asked him as he knelt, staring through the bush at the dead sheep, an expression of agonizing boredom written across his face. ‘We could be waiting for ages.’

‘Because’ Leroy said again, the vein in his forehead pulsing harder as his patience with Waltz grew thinner with every word that fell out of his mouth. ‘If the food isn’t enough to lure it, I’ve laced it with musk.’

‘Musk?’

‘The scent of a female in season’ Leroy replied.

Waltz turned to him then, wearing a strange expression. ‘Why do you even *have* that on you?’

‘Shush’ Kyle said to Waltz. ‘Leave Leroy be. He’s our leader. He knows what he’s doing.’

‘I’m just wondering’ Waltz continued, speaking to Kyle now. ‘Shouldn’t we be surrounding it? Why are we all here? All of us together....oohhhh....’

Leroy’s eye twitched in annoyance then as Waltz rounded on him.

‘You just want to be surrounded by men! I knew you were an upstairs gardener!’

‘Keep your voice down!’ Tom hissed at him, grabbing him and clapping a hand over Waltz’s mouth as Waltz began to struggle frantically.

‘Keep him quiet’ Leroy hissed as Waltz fought against Tom.

It took several men to subdue him, which seemed to make Waltz panic even more.

‘Why *are* we all hiding here?’ one of the other guild members named Earnest asked Leroy.

‘Maybe Waltz is right. Wouldn’t it be better if we surrounded it?’

‘No’ Leroy replied, turning away from the huddle of bodies behind him as the others fought to keep Waltz silent. ‘We can’t fight it here. It would only get away from us. A flying beast like that would only try to escape. After all, why risk your life unless you’re desperate, and there’s far easier prey than us around here anyway.’

‘So what are you going to do?’

Leroy glanced down at his side, where rested in the grass a bow, alongside a single arrow with feathers at the end that glowed bright red with magic.

‘We’ll track it’ Leroy said. ‘As soon as it is stuck with this arrow, we can follow it anywhere, even if the arrow gets dislodged after a time, the magic will remain in the creature’s body and it will leave a trail wherever it goes.’

‘That’s amazing’ Earnest said, gazing at the arrow with large eyes. ‘It must have been very expensive to buy.’

‘It was’ Leroy said resentfully, reaching his fingers down to touch it, stroking it tenderly like a mother would a child. ‘I’ve.....been saving it.’

‘And you know what beast this is?’ Earnest asked him.

‘From the description the villagers gave me’ Leroy replied withdrawing his hand, ‘...it’s a griffin.’

In the end Waltz had to be chloroformed to be kept quiet. No doubt he would complain bitterly about it later, and accuse Leroy of all sorts of mischief. But for the minute Leroy didn’t care. He had other thoughts on his mind. And so, he waited.

It must have been about half an hour later, when something interesting happened.

First they heard a screech. It sounded like a great eagle, but on a far larger scale.

The members of the guild cast their eyes towards the heavens, gazing all around for the mouth from which the cry had come from.

Beside them Waltz woke suddenly with a gasp, eyes wide as he sat bolt-upright.

The griffin was a modest creature, smallish in size though with wings large in proportion to its body. The colour of its wings and fur were black and brown mottled, with patches of white. Its eyes were angry, and its black beak was sharp and cruel.

The griffin drew closer to the dead sheep, beating its colossal wings and landing heavily by the carcass.

The instant it had touched the ground, Leroy rose from behind the bush, standing tall and drawing the string of the bow back, the magical arrow ready to fire.

The griffin rounded towards him, screeching furiously, looming over the dead sheep with his claw upon its flank.

Leroy fired. The arrow whipped through the air, striking the beast in the shoulder, it was embedded deep into the monster's flesh. The griffin screeched again, crouching low with wings raised high, leaping up and climbing into the air as it began to fly away.

'Quickly!' Leroy snapped to the others as he turned on his heel and marched towards the horses that were tied up and hidden nearby. 'We must hurry!'

The others rose swiftly, one of them grabbing Waltz as they went. The eleven members of the guild mounted their horses, except for Waltz, who crawled gingerly onto his.

Leroy was already setting off, kicking his horse into a canter as he followed the trail through the sky, hunting the beast, and going where it led. Chasing after him were the other ten members of the guild, with Waltz dragging after them, barely hanging onto his horse as the creature plodded along after the others.

They chased the beast into the mountains.

'Curse this thing' Leroy growled when they reached the foot of the rocky slopes. 'It's too high.' He wheeled his horse around to face the others. 'We're going to have to climb.'

Waltz reached the group, hearing the last words Leroy had spoken.

'Climb?'

Waltz tilted his head back to the steep and rocky slope.

'....oh no....'

The group dismounted the horses. There was nowhere to tie them in the rocky place, and so they simply left them to wander.

'Now don't go too far away' Waltz told his horse that had no name. 'I want to be able to find you when I get back. Ok?'

The horse just stared at him.

'Great!' Waltz grinned, grabbing the air before him excitedly. 'Now you be good!'

He turned and ran away, after the other members of the guild that were already climbing the steep slope.

'Right' Waltz said, gritting his teeth in determination. 'Let's do this!'

The slow and arduous ascent to the top was slow and arduous. It was gruelling and exhausting and arduous and slow, and Waltz's enthusiasm quickly drained away.

'How high is this thing?' he hissed through clenched teeth as his muscles burned and his fingers bled from climbing the jagged rock. 'It feels like we've been climbing for years!'

'Are you alright down there?!'

It was Tristan, one of the other guild members.

‘Yeah! I’m fine!’ Waltz called back. ‘It’s not like gravity ever killed anyone’ he added in a mumbled under his breath as he continued on.

‘It’s not far now’ Tristan hollered down to him. ‘Just keep going!’

Waltz dared a glanced at the drop behind him, his stomach tightening as he did so.

Oh come on. Since when were you scared of heights? He thought then. *I wonder how far I can bounce...*

‘Come on’ another of the guild members called to him from above. ‘We’re almost there!’

A few minutes later, and Waltz reached the top of the cliff, hauling himself over the edge and onto safe and relatively flat ground.

Before him, the rest of the guild was waiting for him to catch up. Waltz crawled forwards, getting his feet beneath him and standing.

He turned to the land behind him, towards the lush world beyond the cold and rocky cliffs. There lay a vast and green countryside, the bright fields and forests a vivid contrast with the blaring ocean blue.

The world they lived in was a bright place, a thriving place, and as the eleven guild members watched, they saw within the ocean a great whale break the surface of the water, lifting its body high before throwing itself back with an almighty splash. It descended into the depths again, as deep a place where the sun’s light could not reach. The guild members were happy to witness such a sight; even Leroy could not hold back the smile from his face.

‘I love this world’ Waltz declared, casting his arms out wide. ‘This bright and beautiful place! I hope I never have to leave!’

Suddenly a terrible screech cut through the air, an ear piercing call, a sharp reminder of why they were all there.

The guild members had tensed then, all staring towards the maze of rocks where the sound had come from.

Waltz swallowed the lump in his throat, standing on the edge of the cliff with his back to the drop. He watched as the griffin made itself known, clawing at the rock before them as it advanced menacingly, like a hunter, seeking its prey.

‘It’s alright’ Leroy spoke calmly, holding his arm out to the others behind him. He was the closest to the approaching beast. ‘It’s a small one. It’s not much of a threat to us if we stick together.’

The griffin roared then, contorting its body.

It lunged suddenly, claws outstretched as it tore forwards, wings beating hard as it bolted straight for Waltz.

The griffin took flight as it almost reached the cliff edge where Waltz stood; sailing over the top of his head so close that Waltz felt its wings brush him as it went.

The swift movement of the beast and the strong downdraft of its wings caused Waltz to stumble back, teetering on his heels on the very edge of the cliff, arms flailing as he threatened to topple over.

‘Waaahh...Waaaahhhh...WAAAAAAHHHHHHH!’

Someone reached out to him then, grabbing him by the orange scarf around his neck.

Tom smirked at him, holding the end of the scarf as Waltz leant back over the drop.

‘Lucky scarf?’ Tom smirked.

Waltz grinned back at him as Tom pulled him back. Waltz stumbled forwards, once more onto flat ground again.

‘Phew!’ he sighed. ‘That was a close one.’

‘It’s coming back!’ Leroy called out to them as the griffin circled in the air.

The eleven members of the guild all drew their weapons. Waltz twirled his sword with a grin, standing with his side to the griffin as it drew closer, dropping in the air fast and heading straight towards them.

Waltz turned as it shot past him with all speed, stumbling in the sudden gale the beast created, his white blond hair and clothed whipped around him.

Leroy at the back of the group leapt upwards into the air as it drew closer to him, reaching an impossible height. The other members of the guild (Waltz included) watched in awe as, almost in slow motion, Leroy came before the griffin in the air.

The griffin opened its maw wide open, as Leroy spun in the air, faster and faster, twirling his twin blades as he did, cutting the beast deep, who could not have gotten out of the way.

Leroy fell back to the ground, landing on a knee with his head bowed, swords held out either side of him as the griffin crashed in the rocks behind him.

‘Aww that was so *cool*!’ Waltz cried, fangirling suddenly, fists balled and body shaking with excitement. ‘Leroy you’re such a badass!’

‘Enough!’ Leroy barked at him rising to his feet. ‘Quickly! Kill it’s while it’s down!’

The guild members obeying instantly tore forwards, attacking the unfortunate beast from all angles and cutting it deep.

The poor beast, suddenly afraid screeched in pain, using a gust of wind to throw them back and trying to flee into the sky.

‘Oh no you don’t’ Kyle smirked, throwing his weapon up to catch the griffin as it tried to make its escape.

Kyle cast his hand out, throwing his weapon up towards the griffin. His backwards curved knife on a chain caught the beast, hooking around the joint of its wing. Kyle pulled sharply downwards, and the griffin was torn from the air and sent hurtling downwards again.

The griffin tumbled, crashing into the mountains and breaking rocks as it fell.

The members of the guild advanced slowly towards the beast, weapons raised, eyes fixed on the vague shape within the settling dust as it righted itself.

The griffin rounded on them, screeching in anger, but there was panic there also.

Waltz smirked, stepping forwards.

‘Now it’s my turn.’

The other guild members parted as Waltz advanced, shoulders hunched. He swung his sword, twirling in the air the bright ribbon tied to the hilt which he used to distract his enemies from the blade. Waltz held the weapon before him in both hands now, grinning wildly with eyes wide and gleaming.

‘Now I’m ready.’

The guild members either side of him created a sort of corridor between him and the beast, and Waltz stood alone, separated from the others, now the centre of the griffin’s attention. It clambered over the rocks, running on all fours now as it charged straight for him. Now desperate, it lost all caution and attacked with everything it had.

Waltz tilted his head up, the instant before the griffin was upon him. He stepped to the side at the last moment, whipping his sword just as the beast ran past him, cutting deep into its shoulder. The griffin screeched, turning back to him and lunging again. Waltz twirled the sword several times, the red cloth tied to the hilt he used to distract the beast, stepping back and turning and ducking, dodging the griffin's attacks as it swiped at him again and again, growing ever more frustrated with each miss.

Waltz took a step back, moving carefully away now as the griffin stomped towards him, matching his pace. It followed Waltz, ignoring the guild members either side. Its large talons tore at the earth as it went, wings flexing and muscles tense. It screeched then, maw open wide and hackles raised.

Leroy suddenly struck, lunging forwards with one of his swords and stabbing the beast right the way through the neck.

Everyone froze.

Leroy narrowed his eyes, tightening his grip on the sword, before jerking it sharply back.

The griffin stumbled forward, coughing up a great pool of blood and falling forwards. It heaved itself up one last time, reaching towards Waltz, before collapsing and becoming still.

Leroy straightened as the other guild members around him relaxed, sheathing their weapons and smiling.

'Well done everyone!' Leroy called out to them, wiping clean his twin blades before sheathing them. 'You've all done well today.'

The others began to congratulate one another, milling around and patting each other on the back. Waltz wiped his forehead with his arm, still holding his sword in his hand.

'Good job Waltz' one of them said to him.

'Thanks Earnest' Waltz gleamed back.

Only Leroy was the one who did not share in their celebration. He approached the dead griffin, staring down at it intently. It was a modest size.

He put his foot against its flank, using all of his strength to push it. The griffin slumped, body limp as it rolled to lie on its side.

Leroy's attention drifted down the griffin's body. He saw that the creature was male.

His eyes travelled back up its body and to its head and chest. He saw the griffin's chestnut plume was tipped with a red hue. The skin around its beak and claws were flushed, burning red.

Leroy grimaced, realising what this meant. He stepped back, jerking his head up to the guild members around him, barking a command out to all of them.

'Be silent!'

They obeyed him instantly. Like flipping a light switch, each man instantly held his tongue.

'Listen to me' Leroy said to them urgently. 'This isn't over.'

'What do you mean?' Waltz asked him. 'It's dead isn't it?'

'This is not the beast we are supposed to be hunting' Leroy told him. 'It's far too small to have caused the damage we saw back in the village. There is another.'

'What?'

'Look' Leroy pointed. 'Look at its body. The males are always smaller. This beast is in heat. Its mate must be nearby.'

'Oh pants...' Waltz gulped nervously. 'I think you're right.'

‘Yup’ Kennedy confirmed, approaching the dead griffin and leaning on its body, looking down at it as he inspected it closely. ‘It’s a boy.’

‘We mustn’t let our guard down’ Leroy told them. ‘The female is here, she must be. Griffins nesting never travel too far from their eggs, and never leave them for too long. It’s here...somewhere. Come on’ he said turning and marching away. ‘We have to find it.’

They wandered through the mountains, heading deeper and deeper within the rocks. As they went, Waltz glanced fearfully about them, eyes wide as he trembled.

‘It could come from anywhere’ he uttered, gazing all about him. ‘Every crack, every crevasse....it could be watching us...even now...’

‘It’s alright’ Rude comforted him, placing his hand firmly on his shoulder. ‘We’ll get it. It’s all of us against it remember?’

‘Have you ever seen a mature female before?’ Waltz asked him as they walked. ‘They are monstrous. They are scary. We are all going to die!’

‘Snap out of it’ Rude hissed, shaking him then. ‘We can kill it; just have a little faith in yourself. Do you doubt your own abilities?’

Waltz stopped then, thinking about this.

‘I...’ he began. ‘I...’

And then he turned.

Waltz drew a deep breath, crying out in fear and pointing.

‘There!’ he called. ‘It’s hunting us!’

‘Relax’ Rude told him, sparing the rocks beside them only a brief glance. ‘There’s nothing there.’

‘No’ Leroy hissed, freezing and glancing back. He raised his hand to the others, signalling them to stop. ‘No one move. Waltz is right.....there is something there.....’

The eleven guild members stared in silence at the rocks beside them.

For the longest time, nothing moved.

‘It’s stalking’ Leroy whispered. ‘There...’

Three great claws black like obsidian appeared then at the top of the rock.

And then the rest of the beast followed after.

It was really big, massive in fact, like...five times the size of the other one. And it was really scary.

It had a head like a great eagle, giant chicken-feet at the front, with really big and sharp feet at the back like a terrifying predator, and its dark wings were large enough to blot out the sun.

Waltz took one look at it.

‘Oh pants...’

It arched its scary back, ready to lunge and kill every single body.

‘RUUUUN!’ Waltz cried turning the other way.

Leroy grabbed him by the collar before he had a chance to escape.

‘Not so fast’ he said pulling him back and shoving him forwards to face the beast. ‘You’ll make wonderful bait.’

Waltz almost stumbled as he was pushed forward, right into the path of the griffin and its terrifying beak.

‘Oh...’ Waltz uttered staring back at it. ‘Cr*p.’

The griffin contorted its body, casting its wings out wide over their heads, before folding them close to its body and leaping, right towards Waltz.

The griffin landed on the ground right beside him, close enough so that its feathers brushed his cheek.

Everything moved in slow motion for Waltz. He turned very slowly towards the griffin, eyes wide with fear, his breath catching in his throat, his eye inches away from the beasts.

It raised its wings again, to Waltz, doing so very slowly, as it made to take off.

Waltz was vaguely aware of Leroy shouting from nearby.

‘ATTACK! DON’T LET IT GET AWAY!’

As the griffin brought its wings down (slowly) somehow Waltz’s scarf got caught on the griffin, and as it took off soaring over the hills and mountains, it took Waltz with it, his curses lost on the wind.

All the others heard of him, were his faint protests at the ridiculousness of the situation.

‘NAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!!!’

On the ground, Leroy stared lazily up towards the sky as Waltz sailed further and further away from them.

‘Hm’ he said.

‘Where do you think it’s going?’ Tristan asked him, straightening and sheathing his sword.

‘The nest must be close’ Leroy said, turning to face the others as the griffin made its escape with Waltz dangling in the air after it, caught on his tangled scarf.

‘Do you think Waltz will be ok?’ Trevor asked, frowning at the shrinking dot that was the griffin.

‘Yeah’ Leroy said confidently turning back to the swiftly fading dot. ‘He’ll fine.’

Tom smirked up at the sky, watching Waltz slowly disappear.

‘Lucky scarf’ he said.

Chapter Six Victory Hurrah!

Waltz sailed through the air rather gracelessly, hanging onto the griffin’s neck for dear life.

‘...please don’t die please don’t die please don’t die...’ he chanted to himself.

It was true that he was able to transform into a flying beast, but this power was only granted to him when the witch needed him for her petty tasks or dirty work. If Waltz was to fall now, he would surely explode on impact on the first sharp rock he hit, or land on a flat surface as a very messy and very bloody pancake. Not a pleasant thought.

Waltz made a very unmanly noise, gritting his teeth and pulling at the griffin’s feathers as he desperately fought to hold on. The griffin hissed angrily at having its feathers so harshly yanked out. It turned and tried to peck at him, Waltz dodging its strikes by mere particles.

The griffin hissed again, getting ever more irate that she was failing to strike him. But Waltz had all the agility and grace of a slippery frog.

The griffin began to descend.

Waltz dared to look below him, still clawing onto the griffin's neck as he tried his best to hang on, thinking frantically in his mind.

I don't want to be a pancake!

The griffin touched solid ground, and as Waltz gazed about him, he saw with alarm that they were standing on a nest, with three pink eggs.

'A griffin's nest!' Waltz said. 'And griffin eggs. Ow!'

The griffin began to peck him again, stabbing him in the head with her sharp beak.

'Flock off!' Waltz cried, shooing it away like it was a particularly annoying insect.

Instead of obeying, the griffin began to nibble the end of Waltz's scarf; slowly the scarf went into the griffin's mouth, like a hamster eating a piece of grass, or a paper shredder eating paper.

Waltz began to choke as the scarf tightened around his neck, his head ascending into the griffin's gaping mouth.

'AAAHHHH. No! WAAAAHHH!'

Waltz cleared his eyes feverishly as the griffin began to dribble on him.

'Ew gross.'

The griffin coughed then, spitting up a human skull that bounced off Waltz's head and landed on the floor beside him as he fell over.

Waltz looked down at it, eyes growing wide as he grinned fearfully.

'Eeeeeee.....'

He leapt to his feet again, trying to shuffle away from the griffin and nearly falling out of the nest.

Waltz teetered on the edge before gaining balance again. He glanced down at the drop behind him, which must have been like a thousand feet or something.

'Oh bugger...' Waltz uttered.

He straightened up again, looking at the area behind the griffin, seeing a distinct lack of the ground he expected.

It was not a cliff edge he found himself on, but a great pinnacle growing up from the earth, the top perfectly flat and level, perfect for a female griffin of this size to lay three perfect pink eggs.

'Oh' Waltz sighed, shoulders sagging. 'Crud.'

The griffin pecked at him again. Waltz yelped in protest like a puppy being kicked.

'Ow! Stop that!'

The griffin squawked at him.

'Don't answer me back!'

It squawked again.

'Oh great' Waltz sighed, placing his hands upon his hips as the griffin began to preen itself.

'This is just perfect...what am I going to do now?'

He turned his back to the griffin as she curled up, tucking her beak beneath her wing and going to sleep, having lost all interest in him.

'Now' Waltz said surveying the sheer drop before him. 'Time for me to get down from here.'

He glanced behind him at the griffin that appeared to be fast asleep already, before looking ahead again.

‘Right’ he said crouching down and climbing backwards over the edge of the drop. ‘Here we go.’

Waltz began his slow and arduous descent down the rocky pinnacle. Thankfully, there were many little nooks and crannies in the rock, and he was fairly easily able to find a foothold to help him climb down.

‘Just don’t slip’ he chuckled to himself nervously as his nails began to bleed from scratching the hard rock. ‘Easy’ he sighed. ‘Piece of cake. Nothing to it.’

‘WALTZ!’

He glanced up then at the sound of his name being called, seeing a band of men running along a narrow ledge against the mountain side near him, led by one in particular.

‘Leroy!’ Waltz called back. ‘Oh thank god!’

‘Where is it?!’

‘Up there!’ Waltz called pointing to the sky above him, and to the top of the pinnacle he had climbed down from. ‘Kill it its evil!’

‘Oh don’t you worry’ Leroy mumbled back. ‘We’ll kill it.’

He tilted his head back, up towards the pinnacle, seeing at the top a long tail hanging from the edge of the nest.

‘Gotcha’ he mumbled.

The griffin as if sensing that it had just been spotted, stirred suddenly, rising and turning towards the men on the narrow path below.

‘Ready men!’ Leroy called, casting an arm out behind him, clutching his weapons tightly in both hands. He narrowed his eyes, whispering to himself. ‘We’ll bring this beast down.’

The griffin roared at them, casting its mighty wings out wide and leaping off the pinnacle and falling straight towards them.

‘READY!’ Leroy hollered.

The men all tensed down the line, holding their weapons to them, preparing for whatever the griffin would give them.

It swept towards them, reaching out to them as it went by, hurtling downwards.

Its swift descent caused a sudden strong gust of wind that threw the party off balance. Leroy lost balance, tipping forwards he fell to the side over the cliff-edge, his expression that of only slight surprise, reaching out as he fell. Trevor grabbed his wrist just in the nick of time, leaning forwards over the drop, his other hand grasping a root that jutted out of the rock behind them. Leroy blinked several times, staring at Trevor and seemingly not phased at all by his near brush with death. He smirked, Trevor grinning at him as he pulled him back to his feet.

‘That was a close one.’

Leroy nodded once, before his expression turned serious again.

Suddenly there came a mighty scream from below them, and glancing down the party could see the griffin clawing its way up the mountain side to reach them, howling as it went, its massive claws leaving huge cuts in the rock.

‘Kill it!’ Waltz shouted, still hanging onto the edge of the pinnacle. ‘It’s evil!’

‘Shut it Waltz!’ Leroy barked.

‘What are we going to do?’ Barry asked calmly as the griffin drew ever closer.

‘We need to get it on the ground’ Leroy said.

‘I have just the thing’ Tristan smiled, raising the spear he carried, at the end of which was a long chain. He cast his arm downwards, holding the spear back and aiming. ‘Look out below’ he said, before throwing the weapon with perfect precision downwards.

The griffin screeched as the spear became embedded in its shoulder.

‘Nice shot.’

‘Thanks Leroy.’

‘Everyone attack!’ Leroy hollered. ‘Chain it and pin it to the ground!’

The griffin roared as it was impaled again and again by the chained spears. It continued to desperately claw its way upwards, feverishly swiping at the men on the narrow ledge in an effort to get at them, but in its haste lost its balance and its grip, falling heavily to the earth below.

‘This is our chance!’ Leroy called. ‘Get it while it’s down!’

Waltz continued to cautiously make his way down the pinnacle as the other members of the guild attacked the griffin. It tried to fight back, but outnumbered and injured and now held to the ground by chains it stood little chance. Waltz felt the rock of the pinnacle he held now shudder beneath his grasp. He looked down, seeing the griffin directly below him crash into the rock as it stumbled back, surrounded by the rest of the guild. It swiped at one of the closer men, roaring in fury as it beat its wings helplessly.

‘WALTZ!’ Leroy called up at him. ‘KILL IT!’

‘You got it’ Waltz smirked, drawing his sword quickly from its sheath and causing it to sing. He brought the sword to his lips, kissing the blade before leaping off the rock, falling down directly onto the griffin’s back and driving the blade deep between its shoulders.

‘Why did the chicken cross the road?!’ Waltz asked as he twisted the weapon, causing the griffin to lurch forwards, throwing up a great stream of blood. ‘To be impaled...’ he jerked the weapon back, ‘by my sword!’

Waltz straightened as the beast fell beneath him, collapsing on all fours. He stood on its back tall and proud with the tip of the sword pointed in the air.

‘WWWHOOOOOO!’ He called triumphantly. ‘That was clucking fantastic!’

Several members of the guild on the ground around him sighed in exasperation; several more were face palming, rolling their eyes and groaning in anguish.

‘That was so lame’ Tom mumbled.

‘You’re lame!’ Waltz retorted.

Leroy straightened, dusting himself down and relaxing his sword arm.

‘Good work everyone’ he said. ‘We wouldn’t have been able to do it if not for team effort.’

Waltz gave his sword a quick wipe, before sheathing it and leaping off the unfortunately dead griffin.

‘What’s up there?’ Leroy asked him and Waltz strolled by. ‘Is there a nest?’

‘What?’ Waltz fumbled glancing back. ‘Oh...yes...’

‘Is there anything up there?’ Leroy asked casually.

‘Um...eggs’ Waltz replied. ‘Three of them.’

‘They could be worth a lot of money’ Leroy continued.

‘Yeah’ Waltz agreed. ‘They probably....oh I see you want *me* to go get them.’

‘Well since you offered’ Leroy smirked, stepping back and folding his arms in amusement. ‘You’re the best climber out of all of us. So come on’ he shooed Waltz away. ‘Get going.’ Waltz’s body slumped in disappointment. He looked back up to the top of the pinnacle with a groan, turning reluctantly and making his way back, grumbling and muttering under his breath as he went.

The other guild members watched as Waltz made his treacherous way back up the sheer wall of the pinnacle, cursing angrily as he began his arduous ascent once again to the very top where the nest sat, its three pretty pink eggs waiting for him.

‘Take your time!’ Leroy called up to him from the ground. ‘We’ll wait here!’

‘Yeah yeah’ Waltz muttered under his breath, grabbing onto another rock and haling himself up. ‘Don’t you worry...I’ve got all the time in the world.’

Hours passed, and darkness began to fall. The members of the guild who remained on the ground built a camp and were now huddled around the fire, warm and happy as they cooked sausages, marshmallow, fish, potatoes and just about anything they could find and everything they carried with them in their bags.

‘Mmmm’ Barry said as he chewed on a piece of toast. ‘Delicious.’

Several more hours passed, before Waltz finally made an appearance.

Some of the members of the guild had gone to sleep, but most were still awake.

Waltz reached the bottom of the pinnacle, climbing delicately down its sheer cliff and coming to stand safely on top of the griffin that remained where it had fallen, hopping off its back and touching solid and flat ground once more. He turned to face the others, lowering carefully onto the ground the three precious eggs he had worked so hard to retrieve. He had carried them in his scarf, which he had tied in the shape of a sack and used to bring them down.

Leroy reached for one of them, lifting it before him. In the firelight it seemed to glow slightly, its shell lightly dappled as its pink surface shone.

‘Good Waltz’ Leroy said to him. ‘Very good.’

Waltz slumped on the floor right where he stood, shuffling up to the fire to warm his hands.

‘I think’ he began slowly staring into the dancing flames, ‘I have earned some pie.’

Chapter Seven Things go Pants Again

They travelled back to the village to collect their reward, and then onwards from there to the bureau, where every wizard, mage, witch, sorcerer, magician and necromancer (or anyone else of magical preference, human or otherwise) went to form their own guild. Only after a guild was formed would a group of magical beings be allowed to accept contracts for

missions, and at the end of every mission, the guild master had to report back to the bureau. In short it was a big – fancy building that managed all the guilds in the kingdom, and they did all sorts of important stuff involving lots of paperwork.

To form a new guild several requirements had to be met, the most important being that there had to be at least six members to form a guild and be officially recognised and allowed by law to accept contracts. Unless the guild was already formed and some of the members died, which did happen sometimes, there were never allowed to be less than six. The strongest guild recognised by the bureau in this kingdom had just three members. But together, they had almost god-like powers, and were practically indestructible and invincible and immortal all at the same time.

Every guild strived to be like them, but many died in the process.

The bureau was a large white building, and shone like a jewel on a sunny day, visible for miles around in the field of green on which it sat on. It was a grand building, the grandest many would see in their lives.

Leroy led the way up the wide marble steps, the rest of the guild following behind him.

‘How much do you think we’ll get for them?’ Barry asked him, eyeing up the eggs Leroy carried in a sack.

‘I don’t know’ Leroy mumbled. ‘That all depends.’

‘On what?’

Leroy grimaced, shooting him a look of annoyance.

‘On whether or not they’re still alive.’

‘Right...’

‘If they’re dead they are worth nothing. If they are alive...’

‘Who would want a living griffin egg?’ Waltz butted in, running forwards to prance alongside Leroy.

‘Griffin eggs are rare’ Leroy told him, ‘and believe it or not, but griffins can be tamed. If they are still alive...’ he paused to glance down at the eggs, ‘they could be worth a lot of money if we can find a buyer rich enough to seriously want one.’

‘And if they’re not?’ Waltz asked tentatively.

Leroy grimaced again.

‘If they are dead’ Leroy sighed, ‘then they can be preserved and sold as pretty ornaments, for a mere fraction of the price they would sell if the eggs were living.’

‘How much would that be then?’

Leroy considered Waltz, giving him a stoic expression.

‘Ever bought a single chicken egg?’

Waltz faltered then, his eyes growing wide.

‘Is that all?! After all that work?! What do you think the odds are of the eggs being alive?’

Leroy grimaced for the third time, glancing down at the eggs.

‘Slim if I’m honest’ he said. ‘The female griffin left her nest all too easily. And if the eggs were alive, then it would have been unlikely that there was a male ready to breed nearby...think about it.’

‘Oh great’ Waltz huffed, sulking now and shoving his hands in his pockets. ‘I was nearly killed for those eggs.’

‘So where the rest of us’ Leroy glowered.

‘Don’t worry’ Kyle said, patting Waltz on the back heartily. ‘We still get the reward from the villagers for killing the griffin.’

‘Yeah’ Waltz grumbled. ‘I guess...’

‘What’s wrong?’

The members of the guild stopped then, stepping back from the doorway before them to allow a figure to walk past. Waltz’s breath caught in his throat at the sight of her.

She was an entire head taller than everyone else, human (as far as she claimed) and scantily clad in armour that shone bright yellow, protecting only the most vital parts of her body. Her hair glowed yellow as bright as her armour, and lifted in the air, floating as if underwater, drifting slowly in an unfelt breeze. She was devastatingly beautiful, and Waltz felt honoured that she spared their group the tiniest of glances as she sailed past....almost.

The guild members stopped, watching her as she walked away.

‘That’ Waltz said. ‘I want to be powerful...and revered.....like that.....like her. Rhona.’

‘Well’ Kyle said jovially slapping him on the shoulder again. ‘We all start small eh? Now let’s go get that reward...maybe!’

The other members of the guild continued on. But Waltz remained where he was, lingering there just a moment longer, watching Rhona walk away until she was out of sight.

He sighed longingly.

‘One day’ he spoke to himself, ‘one day...I will be as powerful as you....I will be famous....and everyone will know my name.....one day....’

He turned and followed the rest of his guild, to the main office where loot was traded for cold hard cash, where the bureau paid their members for gathering extra booty on their quests.

‘Sorry’ they were told, after they had spent nearly an hour lining up to see the right man who dealt in the sort of thing they were trying to get rid of in the flying magical creatures department. ‘They’re dead.’

‘Are you kidding me?!’

‘I could crack one open for you’ the man behind the desk replied to Waltz in a bored tone, ‘but that would make them slightly more worthless than they already are.’

‘No its fine’ Leroy sighed as Waltz stormed away. ‘We’ll take what we can for them.’

The man took the three eggs, placing them safely in a box then placing that box on a conveyer belt behind him, which would take all treasures placed there to a secret place deep within the bureau where it was categorized depending on which buyer they would try to sell it to.

After doing this, the man behind the desk reached for one of the draws, picking out a single coin and handing it to Leroy.

‘Try not to spend it all at once’ the man smirked in humour.

Leroy took the single bronze coin, trying his best to suppress a sigh.

‘Thanks’ he said flatly, before pocketing it and marching away, followed by the rest of his guild.

They returned to their own business after that, to relax and take some time off enjoying the reward that was split between them. They made the most of what they had, until they were gathered again for another quest.

Waltz sat with Barry and Rude on a picnic bench on the grass outside the inn the guild were currently staying at. They weren't lucky enough to have their own permanent residence like some guilds, and so they were forced to travel from one place to another, always on the move as they went from inn to inn and on worse days when work was scarce, camping out in the elements, be it summer or winter. Life was hard, and the guild was always on the move. This time they had a little extra money to spare, and so were staying at an inn. They had each stayed at many in their time; this one was a pleasant one, large and spacious and set directly beside a main road, which was for the most part quiet. And around them, was open land where wild, partly-wild and semi-tame animals roamed free. Waltz watched one of these now, a sheep staring at him with disinterest, its jaw working as it chewed the grass in its mouth lazily.

For his own amusement, Waltz copied the gesture.

Beside him, Rude gave a weary sigh and a yawn, reaching for his tankard and drinking deeply. Opposite him Barry shifted slightly, on the verge of falling asleep, he rested now with his head upon his folded arms, dreaming idly in the sun.

When Waltz grew tired of copying the sheep, right down to its random bleats, he threw his arms up into the air, making his best impression of a tree caught in high winds.

The sheep became suddenly very alarmed, bolting away to a safe distance before stopping and adopting its bored posture once again.

Waltz groaned, leaning back against the bench with his elbows on the table behind him, one foot resting upon a knee.

'I'm bored' he said.

Barry turned his head to face him, still resting peacefully on his arms.

'Why don't you go eat some grass?'

'Why don't you put a chicken on your head and dance the fandango?'

Barry smirked, turning away and closing his eyes again. He became still.

Silence ensued again and Waltz tilted his head back staring up at the clouds that drifted lazily over their heads above the earth, so peaceful in a world of their own.

'How wonderful it must be to be a cloud' Waltz mumbled to himself, 'to drift over the land with not a care in the world.'

'I don't know' Rude spoke up, 'I heard it's pretty cold up there.'

'Yeah' Waltz answered peacefully. 'But I bet the view is beautiful.'

Waltz continued to stare up at the sky, the clouds reflected in his bright eyes.

'A new world' Waltz sighed, closing his eyes, '...must be nice...'

Rude watched him for a moment, chin resting on a palm. He spared a glance up at the blue sky above them, before returning his attention to his tankard.

It was a peaceful time for them between quests, and the members of the guild would often split, each going to do their own thing. Some would visit family, others would visit friends, and some like Waltz, Rude and Barry, chose to spend the hours in their day simply relaxing.

Unlike some of the others within the guild, Waltz was lucky enough to have two living parents. But they lived too far away for him to visit. Waltz did not have a family of his own, he had no children, and his lovers would change as often as the seasons. Waltz had never settled down, he was always on the move, never staying in one place for too long. And that was the way he liked it. It was not always an easy life with the guild, each day was as

uncertain as the next, and he was never sure where he would end up or what dangers they might face on their next quest. But it was this that Waltz found most exciting. The days were always changing when you were involved with the bureau.

Waltz heard a voice then sailing through the air.

‘It’s blue’ said the young voice. ‘It has large wings and scarlet-tipped feathers.’

Waltz did not need to look; he knew already what was going on and who the child was talking to.

It was a man called Kenneth, once a member of the guild he shared with Waltz, now he was retired, though not by choice. He had been blinded by an elemental during one of their previous quests, and his sight had never returned. He was cared for and guided now by Patrick, the son of one of the other guild members. Kenneth didn’t have a proper place in the guild anymore; no one knew what to class him as. But they cared for him nonetheless, due to his years of service, and out of kindness and friendship.

‘We’ve got to do something’ Rude said, staring sadly towards Kenneth and Patrick who explained the birds that were flitting through the sky around them.

Waltz opened his eyes, looking now towards Kenneth. Barry sat up too, staring.

‘What can we do?’ Barry asked.

‘I don’t know’ Rude sighed, ‘...*something*...’

Waltz watched the pair, saying nothing.

He noticed suddenly movement to his side, turning his head towards Leroy who marched towards them.

‘Oh no...’ Waltz groaned, feeling a sinking sensation in his chest. ‘What does he want?’

Leroy stormed right up to their table, slamming down on the wood a sheet of paper, his fingers splayed over it. He withdrew his hand, and the three guild members sitting at the table all leant forwards, peering at the sheet.

‘Siren’ Waltz read out loud. Then he baulked. ‘What is this?’ he stammered. ‘You don’t want us to kill this do you?’

Leroy smirked at him. Waltz could see the adventure and excitement already gleaming in his eyes.

‘You are correct’ he said. ‘There is a big reward for killing this siren, not as a paid contract but in loot. It’s said that she is guarding quite a plunder. The man who put up this contract has lost his son to this beast. He says the pay is whatever it’s guarding in its cave.’ Leroy paused. ‘I hear it’s quite a lot.’

‘How do you know?’ Waltz voiced with interest. ‘How do you know what it’s guarding?’

‘There are those who have gotten close enough to see inside its lair’ Leroy answered, ‘but these are simple fishermen and townsfolk. They dare not get any closer.’

‘Great’ Waltz said flatly, glancing up at Leroy. ‘Let’s summon the other members of the guild and get going.’

‘That’s the thing’ Leroy bowed. ‘We have to go *now*.’

‘Now?’

‘Now’ Leroy repeated, shooting an irritated glare at Waltz.

‘Why the rush?’

Leroy glanced down at the sheet before him, picking it up and staring intently at it.

‘This contract has been up for only a few hours, and it’s already peaked a lot of interest. If we want to claim the treasure, then we have to be the first ones there.’

‘But we’re missing Trevor, Earnest, Kennedy, Tom, Kyle and Richard.’

‘It’s alright’ Leroy answered. ‘There are four of us here’ Leroy indicated the four of them around the table. ‘And don’t forget Tristan’ Leroy said straightening up and glancing behind him.

The others looked around. Waiting by the inn, already with his horse saddled, Tristan waited.

‘Well...’ Waltz sighed straightening up. ‘We’d better get a move on.’

In no time at all, the five of them were grasping onto the jagged rocks by the coast, being lashed by the stormy waves and trying not to slip on the seaweed that spawned at their feet, trying not to fall into the sea and drown.

‘Do you think we could have picked a better day for this?!’ Waltz called over the wind.

Leroy didn’t answer, only glared at him, his clothes being whipped around as he gave Waltz a level expression.

Waltz turned away, gritting his teeth, he continued to edge carefully along the rocks, moving tentatively and holding on for dear life.

‘One of life’s little pleasures when you’re part of a guild’ he sighed quietly under his breath, knowing the others wouldn’t hear him. ‘Oh but there are better days...’

They reached the edge of the rocks, finding here a great hole before them, just below the surface of the icy water.

Waltz grimaced then, turning back to the others.

‘Here it is!’ he called.

‘Go on!’ Leroy called back with a slight grin. ‘After you!’

Waltz turned away quickly, refusing to give Leroy the satisfaction of his displeasure. He stared at the hole beneath the water for a few seconds, taking a deep breath and moving forwards, climbing into the sea before he had a chance to doubt the situation. Waltz ignored the biting cold as he dipped below the surface and pulled himself along the rocks. A very short time after he resurfaced, finding himself inside a large cave that was lit by a strange blue glow that emanated from a sort of fungus growing upon the rocks above water.

Seconds later the others joined him, first Leroy, then Tristan, Barry and finally Rude.

Rude hugged himself, beginning to shiver violently.

‘Gods I can feel my balls shrinking...’

‘Come on’ Leroy said, acting as if the cold, wet water did not faze him. ‘This way.’

They swam through the water until they reached a part where the rocky floor was raised beneath them. From here they were able to trudge onwards, the water from this point only waist high.

‘Funny’ Waltz was saying licking the salty water from around his lips. ‘I fancied a swim anyway.’

‘Alright we must be nearly there’ Leroy said pausing and reaching for his top pocket.

He took out several small pieces and passed them around.

‘We mustn’t hear her when she sings’ Leroy said to them, as the others shoved the wet cotton wool into their ears. ‘She will try to put a spell on us.’

‘So what’s the plan?’ Barry asked.

Leroy paused, his pieces of cotton wool still in his hand.

‘No plan’ he replied. ‘Get close...kill her. If stealth fails’ he said, ‘then we go all out. We’ll kill this hag before she harms anyone else, and leads them to their death with her song.’

‘Right’ Waltz said resting his sword upon his shoulder. ‘Let’s rock and roll.’

They made their way onwards, they had reached the end of the cave when they finally saw it, and it was no hag.

She lay on her front on the edge of a rocky shore, the water around her was crystal clear and as still as glass. From the waist down she had a green and purple scaly tail, like that of a fish. As Waltz spied this, the Siren curling it slowly back and forth, he was reminded suddenly of the goldfish that swam in the ornamental ponds of a pretty town he had once passed through.

The five members of the guild crept carefully closer, keeping close to the wall, although everything was lit in a pale blue glow that radiated from the strange moss around them, and there was nowhere to hide. Waltz noticed Leroy ahead of them glancing all around, searching for a place to conceal themselves. But there was none. Leroy looked ahead again, grimacing as he advanced forwards, his hold on his swords tightening. Leroy focused on the siren again. Her skin was pink like a human’s, her chest was covered by a feathery layer and she had short blond hair upon her head, beneath which grew two long and mighty wings, draped downwards and bright orange in colour, like the setting sun.

It could not be denied. She was very beautiful as she lay there upon her mound of gold and silver coins, she would be the object of every man’s desire. Every man, save for any member of a guild, who was all too familiar with a siren’s trickery.

‘We can’t get close without being seen’ Leroy whispered, stopping in his tracks suddenly. ‘There’s no point in trying a surprise attack.’

And then he realised the others couldn’t hear him, not now that they had their earplugs in. He glanced back at them, and each of them was giving him a strange expression, wondering why he had suddenly stopped.

Leroy sighed, facing ahead again and straightening up, abandoning his hunched posture as they crept up to the creature.

The siren suddenly noticed them. Seeing that Leroy had given up on the idea of a sneaky attack, the others straightened up also.

The siren watched them curiously for a moment, a look of innocence and purity is what she adopted.

She smiled shyly, before crawling around on her hands, her scaly tail waving to the side as she slipped into the water so carefully, she barely caused a single ripple in its surface.

Waltz stared wide eyed at her as she drew closer. Even from here he could see her lips moving as she sang her song. But to him he heard nothing, nothing but the blood pumping his ears, and his own breath in his throat.

But it was not him that the siren drew closer to. It was Leroy.

She drew as close to him as the water would allow, using her tail to prop herself up before him. Leroy was on guard and high alert, his sword raised, ready for whatever this thing might do. The siren’s lips were speaking words unheard, and Leroy watched her mouth move silently.

After a few seconds the creature stopped singing, looking a little wounded, like a little girl. Her trick wasn’t working, and for a moment Waltz began to feel sympathy towards the thing.

No he thought quickly to himself. *No you mustn't let yourself fall for its tricks.*

The siren glanced to the other members of the guild, seeing the weapons they carried, before looking back at Leroy. She smiled widely, in a gesture that seemed genuine.

She knows we can't hear her Waltz thought. *She knows...*

The siren moved closer. Leroy drew a slow intake of breath as it descended on him, her profile towering over his. But still the other members of the guild did not move, they remained uncertain, waiting for whatever was to happen.

The siren leant closer to him still, reaching out to touch Leroy's face, caressing him tenderly. She glanced one last time towards the others, as if checking on them to see if they had moved, before returning her attention back to Leroy.

She kissed him, lips planted firmly on his as her hands ran down his body.

It looked at first a move made from lust, but as Waltz watched, he saw her check several of his pockets as she did this.

Beside him Tristan began to draw his bow, doing this swiftly and silently as he ducked behind the others out of sight. He raised his head, glancing up at the siren as either side of him, Barry and Rude reached into their own pockets.

Waltz took a step back, allowing his body to relax slightly. He had no projectile weapons or spells upon him, and so allowed the others to take the lead. He watched calmly as Tristan fired the first shot, impaling the siren in the ribs. Her body jerked to the side from the impact as she released Leroy, but she had no time to scream as she was hit twice more by spells thrown from Barry and Rude's direction. The ingredients from the spells they had used scattered everywhere, as in one swift move Leroy flicked his sword upwards, decapitating her before anyone else knew what had happened.

Her body collapsed and her severed head fell with a heavy splash into the water. She would not have felt a thing.

Waltz let out a weary sigh, sheathing his weapon and straightening up, taking the soaking cotton wool from his ears as the others did the same.

'That's better....' He said. 'I can hear now.'

'Nice one' Tristan nodded to Leroy, 'finishing off the beast yet again.'

Leroy nodded silently, cleaning the blood from his sword and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

'Hey' Rude interrupted suddenly. 'We've got company.'

The others glanced around, spotting the figures that Rude indicated.

'Hello boys' said a smiling female figure.

The guild stared at her in surprise, wondering how she got there.

'Thank you for doing all the work' the woman waved over to them as other figures appeared behind her. 'We'll be leaving now.'

'Hey!' Leroy called striding forwards. 'That reward is ours. We killed the beast.'

'And you did an amazing job' the woman congratulated, opening a tiny purse as she did so.

'But now it's time for you to leave.'

She glanced down to the coins and jewels and gems below her, extending the tiny purse outwards as she did so. The coins and treasures began to move, swirling as if in a high wind that none of them could feel. Everything went into the woman's tiny purse. Not a single piece was left.

‘Hey!’ Waltz called angrily. ‘This isn’t fair.’

The woman regarded them all with a cold expression, eyeing them as if she considered them to be only one small step above sea slugs.

‘We can fight you for it if you’d like’ she answered coolly.

Waltz sneered at her, taking a step forwards. But Leroy stopped him suddenly, grabbing onto his arm roughly as he started towards them.

Waltz was about to object, but a glare from Leroy silenced him.

‘We won’t try to stop you’ Leroy called over to them.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Waltz hissed.

Leroy held his tongue.

The woman, what must have been the leader of the other guild smirked at them. She turned to the others behind her, raising her hands. A flurry of light appeared around them as their profiles glowed. In no moment at all, they were gone.

Waltz stared in outrage at the spot where seconds ago they had been standing.

‘What the hell?!’ he declared dejectedly. He rounded on Leroy. ‘Why did you stop me?!’ he snapped, his tone would normally have gotten a rise out of Leroy. But this time Leroy let it slide. ‘Why did you let them get away?’ Waltz demanded. ‘I could have taken them!’

‘No’ Leroy sighed, ‘you couldn’t have.’

‘But...’

‘I care about every member of my guild’ Leroy interrupted. ‘I would not put any of them in danger needlessly.’

‘But...’

‘Waltz’ Leroy interrupted again. ‘We could not have even hoped to win against them. They were a far higher level than us...a more powerful guild.’

‘But...’

‘We would have lost’ Leroy flatly. ‘We stood no chance.’

Waltz stared at him in disbelief, anger and sadness in equal quantities stirring inside him.

‘But...’ Waltz mumbled, speaking weakly now, ‘it’s not fair....’

‘I know’ Leroy sighed. ‘I know.’

Waltz stepped back, shoulder slumped.

He tensed suddenly, eyes wide as he noticed a sudden glow coming from his chest.

‘Oh no’ he groaned, before being forcibly teleported away.

First Waltz stood there. Then there was no Waltz.

The other four members of the guild stared at the spot where he had stood seconds before.

‘What the crud?’ Barry spoke up. ‘Where does he keep going all the time?!’

Leroy sighed heavily now, folding his arms.

‘Come on’ he grumbled turning away. ‘Let’s get out of this cave and into fresh air again.’

A short time later, and Waltz found himself trudging through filth and muck in a part of the kingdom where no sane human being had been in the last thousand years.

It was a horrible place, where a long time ago a great war had raged and fires cast by powerful mages set the land alight. Nothing had grown back since, and the massacre could be seen clearly all around, even after all this time. Within the boggy swamp and muddy filth that

reached ankle deep, could be seen bones. Leg bones and arm bones and ribcages and skulls were everywhere, poking out of the mud and slosh. And there was only dead land, for as far as the eye could see.

‘Powerful magic’ Waltz muttered under his breath, pausing to take in the dreary scene around him. ‘If only it had been used for good.’

Everything that had once grown was now blackened and charred, and the air felt damp and cold.

He had been ordered to this place by the dreadful witch who controlled him. There was something she wished for him to retrieve, but as usual, she kept the details to herself.

‘Keep asking annoying questions and I’ll set your eyes on fire’ she had told him curtly when he asked what she wanted him to fetch.

She sent him away quickly after that, using her magic to whisk him away, although her magic was a little off, and Waltz did not touch the ground smoothly with his feet as was intended, but landed on his back deep in the mud, groaning and whining in displeasure as he felt the cold wet mud seep into his clothes.

He had stood up quickly, beginning to shiver. He moved fast to try to keep himself warm, searching for this thing that the witch wanted him to find.

‘It’s a valuable thing carried by a demon child’ the witch had said to him. ‘She is guarded by a vicious beast. I want you to kill it, and bring me the thing the child carries.’

‘Anything else you would like to tell me?’ Waltz dared ask, hinting at a little more detail, which he didn’t get.

‘No’ the witch had said. ‘Now get going.’

And so here is where Waltz found himself, searching for a thing and feeling thoroughly miserable.

He paused for a moment, staring at the top of a skull which sat before him embedded in the mud; he gritted his teeth in annoyance.

‘Go on’ came the voice of the witch speaking inside his head. ‘Get a move on.’

Waltz suppressed a groan, making his way wearily onwards through the dead wasteland. And here is where he eventually found *the thing*.

‘Oh good’ the witch’s voice said in his mind. ‘You found it.’

Waltz stared in shock at what was before him.

There was a little girl, who could not have been more than six in age. She was dressed in faded colours of blue and white and had light blonde hair and bright blue glowing eyes. Behind her was the most ghastly creature Waltz had ever seen, and one he was unfortunately familiar with. It walked on all fours, with large black clawed hands and naked skin. It was a large creature, with a balding head and pure white eyes. It looked like something that might have once been human, a very long time ago.

‘A ghoul?’ Waltz mumbled, ‘and a possessed child.’ He watched them from what he hoped was a safe distance for a few moments, suddenly realising something. ‘The ghoul is guarding the child’ he said.

‘Don’t worry’ the witch’s voice told him as the ghoul turned to face him, noticing him for the first time. ‘It will only attack you if you hurt it first or get too close. Now kill it.’

‘Hu?’ he baulked.

‘I said kill it. Now. I’m not a patient woman.’

Waltz grimaced, drawing forth his sword and charging forwards before he could give time to doubt himself.

The ghoul bared its teeth, the little girl instantly darted backwards to hide behind the thing.

Waltz's sword was met with the teeth of the ghoul, its angry eyes glowing ever brighter and growing wider. In the few brief seconds that Waltz was face to face with the vile beast, he saw its eyes turn from white to red like blood seeping into water, and black pulsing veins appear in its skin.

He fought back the wave of fear that threatened to rise inside him, instead using all of his strength to push the ghoul back.

'Kill him!' the little girl shrieked behind the ghoul. 'Rip him into bloody pieces!'

As if commanded by the little girl, the ghoul lunged at Waltz, as Waltz had lunged at him. Waltz managed to block its needle-like teeth by magic, holding it back, arms beginning to shake.

'I can't...' Waltz groaned, the muscles around his eyes twitching. 'I can't hold on.'

'If you don't kill it' the witch told him, 'I will kill you myself.'

Waltz grimaced as the light in his chest began to glow again, a warning from the witch that she owned his body and soul. She could do with it what she pleased.

Waltz cried out, partly in fear, partly in anger, and partly in desperation. He lashed out at the beast, cutting it again and again, though it seemed to feel no pain as it fought back, swiping at him. It cut him, its claws digging deep into his shoulder. Waltz rasped in agony, dropping his sword inadvertently. Without a moment's pause he turned and ran, seeking now only a place to hide and heal. But the ghoul ran after him, its large gallop and long legs reached him in no time, and it hurled itself into Waltz's back, shoving him forwards.

Waltz cried out in pain as the ghoul bit into his shoulder, right down to the bone.

Flames erupted around Waltz's body suddenly as he called his magic to him, reaching for the first spell that he could.

The ghoul screamed in panic as his skin caught alight, leaping off him and backing away in anger and confusion.

Waltz pushing himself onto his hands and knees, crawling forwards to escape the thing, but it just came for him again.

Waltz sucked in a sharp breath as he felt the claws of the ghoul digging into his back again. He summoned the fire for the second time. It grew like a mane on his back and shoulders, climbing up the ghoul's arms and burning its chest. It roared again, backing away, but this time it didn't go far.

It began to advance on Waltz again.

'Alright' Waltz mumbled, turning around and climbing gingerly to his feet, ignoring the searing pain from the fresh wounds in his back. 'Let's play.'

They ran towards each other, each without fear, each without weapon. The ghoul fought with teeth and claws. Waltz fought with his magic barehanded.

The possessed girl watched the spectacle from a short distance, eyes large and shining, her profile crouched close to the ground.

The two battle fiercely for many minutes, until one of them fell.

Waltz grabbed the ghoul by the face with both hands, using all and the last of his magic in one desperate attack. He could not fight for much longer, so he tried to end it quickly. But if

the last of his magic wasn't enough to kill the ghoul, then he would be defenceless. It would kill him for sure.

Either the ghoul or the witch Waltz thought as he summoned his fire, the flames burning into the ghoul's face and skull.

It backed sharply away, lashing around and screaming an eerily human scream.

It sunk to the floor, its movement lessening as the fire spread inside its skull. It slumped forwards, and died.

The fires died with it.

Waltz let out a weary sigh, body trembling with exhaustion, he was bleeding from several deep gashed over his body, and felt suddenly weak and drained.

The little girl who had watched the whole thing cried out suddenly, running forwards towards the body of the dead ghoul.

'No!' she begged. 'Get up. Please get up.'

When she received no reaction from the dead ghoul, she began to cry, sobbing into her hands. Waltz watched her uncertainly.

'Well?' the witch's voice came inside his head. 'What are you waiting for?'

'She's just a child' Waltz mumbled, feeling a tug inside his heart.

'No' the witch snapped, becoming angry. 'She was a child. Now she's a monster. Don't be swayed by the emotions she *thinks* she's feeling. Now kill her!'

Waltz hesitated, watching the blue eyed girl cry over the ghoul.

'It's either her' the witch informed him, 'or you.'

Waltz bowed his head.

'I won't wait much longer' the witch sang.

Waltz turned his palm over, summoning his weapon to him by magic.

The little girl stopped her crying, glancing up with shining eyes as Waltz swung the sword back.

He cut her head off in one swift move. Her body began to glow. Waltz reached forward to grab the dark object that was within the pool of magic, his fingers clasping around it as the light faded.

He straightened up, staring down at the strange black thing he held in his hand.

He felt a twinge in his stomach and his heart skip a beat as he suddenly realised what it was.

It was the blackened, charred remains of a child's spine.

Waltz felt suddenly sick.

'Now' hissed the witch. 'Bring me my prize.'

There came a glow from the centre of Waltz's chest, and he was taken elsewhere, to the hut in which the witch supposedly lived.

Today she took on the appearance of a young woman with pale skin, light eyes and blonde curly hair.

She extended her hand silently to Waltz, who offered her the thing he carried.

He was only too glad to get rid of it.

'Very good' the witch said to him. 'You've done very well.'

Waltz gave her a blank stare, deciding to keep his mouth shut to see what would happen.

This time, it only took one day for him to return to the inn in which his guild stayed, trudging onwards through wild and overgrown forests and open and boring plains. He bore his injuries

silently, exposed to the elements along the way. He had not tended to them, but allowed the blood to dry. Desperate to get back to the guild, he wasted no time. He did not rest, and did not eat.

When he finally reached the inn, he was exhausted, filthy and hungry. He found the rest of his guild easily enough, resting and drinking in the hall, clean and happy and well fed.

They were not pleased to see him.

Chapter Eight The Doubters begin to Doubt

‘What?’ Waltz shrugged helplessly as they glared at him.

‘Where the hell have you been?’ Tristan demanded of him. ‘Fancy leaving us on a quest.’

‘Again’ Barry sighed.

‘Hey’ Waltz snapped, becoming defensive now as he pulled an entire tree branch from his hair. ‘We finished the quest remember?’

‘No thanks to you’ Barry mumbled into his tankard.

Leroy raised his head slightly to Waltz, but said nothing.

‘Where *have* you been?’ Trevor asked him, noting his injuries. ‘Have you been fighting?’

‘No I’ve been practicing ballet. Of course I’ve been fighting you halfwit! You think I got these injuries falling down the stairs?!’

His latest excursion had made him particularly ratty at this time.

Trevor turned away silently, drinking from his tankard with an expression that said he didn’t care anyway.

‘What were you fighting exactly?’ Kenneth asked, who was also sitting at the table.

Waltz glanced back at the blind man; the child who guided him was sitting by his side.

‘A ghoul’ Waltz remarked. ‘I was fighting a ghoul.’

‘Why?’ Kenneth asked.

‘Because I thought it would be a laugh’ Waltz replied in a deadpan voice.

‘Did you get it?’

‘Would I be here to speak to you now if I didn’t?’

‘Fair point’ Kenneth said. From then on he was silent.

‘I don’t like it’ Leroy said, speaking up at last. ‘It is most suspicious. Most suspicious indeed.’

‘Go suck a duck.’

‘You need to have someone look at those injuries before they get infected’ Tom spoke up.

‘Will you allow me?’

Waltz gave him a stoic expression, gritting his teeth as he stared back at him.

‘Alright’ he said at last. ‘If you’re careful. It’s still very tender.’

Tom rose from his seat, moving over towards Waltz and leading him away. The other guild members watched them go.

Leroy sighed, resting his chin on his palm.

‘What am I going to do with him?’

‘I don’t think there’s much you *can* do’ Kyle said next to him. ‘He is the way he is. And he will never change.’

Waltz sat on a grassy knoll outside in the sun. He had taken his shirt off, and Tom sitting behind him, began to carefully clean away the blood with a soft cloth, using a bowl of pure clean, warm water to do so.

Waltz flinched as he felt the damp cloth touch his body.

‘You should really have had this looked at earlier.’

‘Yeah well’ Waltz grumbled back sulkily, ‘I didn’t really notice I was bleeding all over my body.’

Tom frowned with displeasure then, continuing to wipe gently at the wounds.

Several minutes passed in silence, until there came a sudden shrieking call from across the grounds.

‘WALTZ!’ a female figure in pink waved at him, standing at a distance. ‘THERE YOU AAAAAAAARE!’

‘Uh oh’ Waltz mumbled as she began charging towards him.

‘Oh’ Tom sighed lazily behind him; lowering the red cloth in his hands and watching casually as the pink figure made her way towards them like a speeding rocket.

‘H-hold on a minute’ Waltz stammered in a feeble effort to protect himself from her attack.

But she barely heard him as she barrelled into him, knocking him over.

‘Waltz!’ she said again leaning over him. ‘I’m so glad to see you! Where have you *been*? I haven’t seen you in *ages*!’

‘Oh’ Waltz said casually, trying not to grimace in pain as she pressed on his wounds, leaning over him as she pinned him to the ground, trapping him on his back. ‘Just here and there.’

‘You’re bleeding!’ she cried.

‘You mean you only just noticed?’ Waltz said under his breath as she stood off him.

‘My poor baby’ she exclaimed. ‘What happened?’

‘Twas a ghoul’ Tom said to her, lifting the bloodied rag and waving to her.

‘Oh’ she said as if she had only just noticed him. ‘Hello Tom. A ghoul you say?!’

‘Yeah’ Tom replied lazily.

She put her hands on her hips then, frowning furiously down at Waltz as he gathered himself and pushed himself gingerly to his feet.

‘You’ve been going off on your own doing dangerous stuff again, haven’t you?’ she scolded.

Waltz glanced back at her; giving her what he hoped was his sweetest and most innocent gaze.

But that look had worn away her sympathy strings a long time ago.

‘How many times do I have to tell you’ she went on, ‘how many times?’

Waltz’s eyes grew wider and considerably more watery; his lower lip began to tremble.

She only frowned at him harder.

Her name was Candy Cake, and she was a fairy. She was a young and pretty woman with a kawai face and adorable glossy lipstick. She wore a short pink skirt, just like the rest of her clothes, a pink frilly top, pink tights and little pink shoes. Her hair was short and curly and pink, as were her eyes. She had a tiny little pink wand, with a little heart on the end, and clips in her hair which were pink and heart-shaped too. Oh, and her fairy wings were pink and sparkly.

Pink was her favourite colour. She liked pink very much.

Pink Pink Pink

‘If you don’t stop giving me that ridiculous face’ Candy Cake spoke dangerously, ‘I will wedge both your feet up your own backside, smother you in honey and leave you outside a bear’s den tied very tightly to the nearest tree.’

Waltz instantly stopped what he was doing.

‘There’ Candy Cake gleamed, straightening up and beaming. ‘That’s better.’

‘What are you doing here?’ Tom asked her.

‘I came because I have some terrible news’ Candy Cake said dramatically, turning to speak to Waltz now. ‘There is a darkness spreading to the north. It is rumoured to be caused by a witch in the area.’

Waltz listened to her words intently. As she went on, his heart began to sink, and his eyes began to glaze over.

‘Waltz? WALTZ! Are you listening?’

‘A witch did you say?’ he mumbled to her in return.

‘Yes’ Candy Cake said triumphantly, having finally gotten through to him. ‘She is a powerful magical witch. Don’t you see? This is your chance to prove yourself! You’ve wanted to challenge yourself haven’t you? You’ve always told me you wanted to make it big. Isn’t this your opportunity?’

‘Forget it.’

‘What?!’

‘I don’t like witches’ Waltz answered flatly. ‘They’re bad luck.’

‘I never figured you to be the superstitious type’ she replied, poking the end of his nose.

‘You figured wrong.’

‘Well’ Tom declared loudly, slapping his knees and rising to his feet, ‘I’d better be going. I can hear my phone ringing.’

‘Don’t be silly’ Waltz turned to him with a frown as Tom wandered off. ‘We haven’t invented mobiles yet.’

Tom went away.

‘Good’ Candy Cake said hugging Waltz’s arm then. ‘We can have some time alone now.’

‘Time for what?’ Waltz asked her a little nervously.

‘You think I came all this way just to tell you about some witch?’ Candy Cake scowled at him.

‘You mean you didn’t just come here to see me?’ he asked.

‘Well...she giggled. ‘That too.’

‘So?’

She grinned at him playfully.

‘Come on’ she spoke softly to him. ‘Walk with me.’

She allowed Waltz to put his shirt back on, the wounds over his body had been cleaned and the worse ones sown up. When he straightened again, she linked arms with him, leading him away and down a narrow path that led to the back of the inn, where lay there a beautiful garden.

The winding path was made of stone, and either side of them as they walked deeper into the garden, were thick and lush bushes of bright pink, within which grew vibrant blue flowers.

Candy Cake let go of Waltz's arm, leaning into one of the bushes and bringing the flowers to her lips, breathing deeply their sweet scent.

'Hmmm' she hummed, opening her eyes and smiling.

And then she saw something in the bush between the leaves. She reached for it. Waltz craned his neck, trying to catch a glimpse what it was, but Candy Cake was not showing.

It was in fact a cocoon she had found. She cupped it in her hands, bringing it to her lips and breathing over it softly.

She stepped back then, raising her head and opening her hands. The instant she did this, a flutter of wings sprung from between her fingers.

In a matter of seconds, the cocoon had transformed into a beautiful butterfly, pink and sparkly. It left a trail of dust hovering in the air as it went.

Waltz stepped closer to her, side by side they watched the thing fly away.

'You shouldn't do that' Waltz told her flatly. 'You'll waste your magic.'

'It's not a waste if it's beautiful' Candy Cake replied.

Waltz sighed, glancing away and placing a hand upon his hip. He tense suddenly then as Candy Cake moved closer to him, taking both his hands in hers and kissing him softly.

She stepped back, smiling widely at him.

'So?' Waltz said expectantly to her. 'Why have you come all this way?'

She smiled again, laughing to herself, before becoming serious.

She stepped back.

'Your father wants you to come home.'

Waltz's expression instantly darkened.

'Oh come on' Candy Cake cooed at him. 'Don't be like that.'

His expression did not change.

'Aren't you going to ask why he wants you to come home?'

'I think I have a pretty good guess as to why' Waltz replied.

'It's time you took up your responsibility' Candy Cake prompted.

'But there are others before me' Waltz argued. 'My uncles, my father himself...but not me.'

'But your grandfather wants you' Candy Cake argued, 'the others...' she hesitated, hunching her shoulders and glancing to the floor, 'they are too old' she said. 'You are young and fit. Why do you choose this life when you could live a far more comfortable and stable life?'

'I didn't choose this life' Waltz replied. 'This life chose me.'

Candy Cake sighed wearily, rolling her eyes.

'The irony' she said speaking to the clouds, 'is that because of this life you lead you have become the best choice, you have gained vast knowledge of the world and its people. But because of this life you lead, you do not want the position.'

'So where do *you* stand in all of this?' Waltz asked raising an eyebrow and crossing his arms.

‘I will be your loving wife’ Candy Cake gleamed hugging his arm then, ‘and we can do what we do together.’

Waltz stared at her, giving her a level expression as she smiled up at him. In his mind he thought.

Do you really love me, or do you love the man you want me to be?

‘I should get back to the inn.’

‘But why?’ Candy Cake whined.

‘Because I want a drink’ Waltz answered flatly.

‘Ok. I’ll come!’

Waltz tried to suppress his groan.

‘I want to meet the other members of your guild.’

‘But you’ve already met them’ Waltz countered. ‘You know them all very well.’

‘Yes but this’ she said wagging a finger at him. ‘There is another reason I came all this way.’

She hugged herself, beaming happily at him. ‘I have a job for you, for all of you. I would be grateful if you would help me.’

‘You want us to kill a monster?’

‘Quests aren’t all about killing bad monsters’ Candy Cake huffed at him. ‘No. I want you to catch a beast for me. It would fetch a high price, and I already have a buyer lined up.’ She winked. ‘A friend of mine, she’s wanted this creature for a while now.’

‘Dare I ask what it is?’ Waltz began tentatively.

‘Oh don’t worry’ Candy Cake waved at him. ‘It’s nothing bad, but you need my help to get it. I’m the only person in miles around that has the power to open a portal to the world in which they live.’

‘And?’ Waltz raised an eyebrow.

Candy Cake leant forward on her knees, giving him a mischievous look. ‘It’s a sleipnir’ she said.

‘A what?’

‘In Norse mythology it’s an eight legged horse.’

‘Oh.’ His expression turned sly then. ‘Cool’ he said.

In no time at all, they were back at the inn, sitting at a table with all the other members of the guild, except for Kenneth, who wasn’t really a proper member anyway. Not since he became blinded. He was off somewhere doing something else.

‘So’ Candy Cake began in a sing-song voice.

Leroy gave Waltz an anguished glance, clearing wondering where this was going, before looking back at Candy Cake.

‘Here is my plan.’

Candy Cake then launched into a very prolonged and very detailed explanation of the mission they were about to embark on. The explanation was unnecessarily prolonged and detailed, but the gist of it went something like this-

‘We travel to this very specific point on the map, its miles away and hard to find, but I can get us all there by magic because I’m awesome. You guys sit around for several days and do

nothing while I track down a unicorn. They are magical and often travel to different dimensions. I won't explain how I know this. I just do.

I will lure this unicorn to me by washing myself in a virgin's tears, then I will trick the unicorn somehow into leading us to a portal and allowing us to cross through. From there, we will somehow find a sleipnir, bring it back and sell it for a butt-load of money, half of which goes all to me for doing most of the work.'

After only reluctantly agreeing to this, Leroy and the rest of the guild found themselves in the other dimension. The unicorn, realising it had been tricked into allowing so many men into its dimension (none of which were a virgin, least of all Candy Cake) immediately ran away.

'No!' Candy Cake squawked. 'Come back!'

'Do we need the unicorn?' Leroy instantly questioned.

'Um...no?'

'Good. Then let it run away.'

Candy Cake turned back to him, looking a little disappointed.

'Come on' Leroy told her. 'We've got work to do.'

Candy Cake straightened up then, facing ahead of her. Around her, the guild did the same, surveying the world they now stood in.

It was a fabulous world.

In the distance there were great rocky canyons made of a pale pink mineral, and the tall grass at their feet was purple and the sky above was pure white like fresh snow.

It was a strange world, and everything about it was different.

'The air feels different' Leroy spoke up, raising his head. 'Not cleaner, or more polluted than in our own world...just...different.'

'Yeah' Tom added in a mumble. 'I feel it too.'

'It's not just the air that's different here' Candy Cake beamed, 'it's the gravity.'

She bowed low then in a dramatic flurry, as if performing in a theatre.

'Do as I do' she said, before jumping as high as she could, and reaching over ten feet in the air.

'What is this?' Leroy said in wonder, watching as she fell gently back down to earth.

'It's the gravity' Candy Cake managed to say landing softly on the grass, before jumping up again. 'It's different to what it is at home!' she called down to them. 'Here it's more fun!'

She landed differently now, doing so in such a way as to stop her ascending towards the sky again. She had to grab a handful of the tall purple grass as she did this, but it was a strong grass that grew here, its roots were deep.

'Go on' Candy Cake ushered them. 'Try it.'

Leroy instantly crossed his arms, frowning in displeasure at her.

'We are not here to play' he scowled. 'We are here on serious buis-'

He didn't get to finish his sentence however, as he was shoved over the edge of the cliff by Waltz. Partly for fun, partly to shut him up, and partly because he knew the fall wouldn't hurt him.

Partly.

All around Waltz the other members of the guild were already jumping up and down like popcorn, having the time of their lives. It was very hilly here, with high bits and low bits and slopey bits and not so slopey bits and flat bits and bumpy bits and....

‘Weeeeeee!’ one of them said. ‘This is fun!’

Candy Cake landed next to Waltz, taking him by the hand and leaping up into the air with him. They ascended together, before falling back down to earth and jumping up again.

‘It’s like playing in the clouds!’ Candy Cake cried happily.

‘If there were any’ Waltz grinned at her.

Today was a cloudless day. The clouds (which were normally a blue so dark they looked black) were hibernating at this time. They would be out again when winter was over.

Clouds in this world were very different to the clouds that most of us know. The clouds here had the texture of cotton candy, but tasted more like marshmallow.

‘See!’ Candy Cake called to the others. ‘Isn’t it wonderful here?’

A very short distance away was Leroy, looking a little irritated, though he couldn’t stop himself from bouncing, and looked a lot ridiculous going up and down constantly.

Candy Cake unfurled her fairy wings then, bringing them out of hiding (her wings were pink and sparkly by the way – duh) here she fluttered for a moment; hovering in the air and watching the others have their fun.

‘Candy?!’ Leroy hollered to her. ‘How do I stop bouncing?’

‘Oh you’ll learn on your own’ Candy Cake gleamed, turning to face him and placing her hands upon her hips. ‘It’s a little hard for me to explain though.’

Leroy ascended in the air again, almost coming to her eye-level.

‘Try’ he said, before falling back down to earth.

‘Hold the grass’ Candy Cake told him with much amusement. ‘It will keep you down.’

Leroy did this, and in no time, he was firmly on the ground again.

He straightened up with a frown. His usual expression.

‘We need to find this sleipnir’ he told her firmly.

‘Right’ Candy Cake nodded, as around her the other members of the guild all bounced up and down as if on a giant trampoline.

Candy Cake fluttered her wings, rising quickly higher in the air. She looked first one way, then the other, squinting and shielding her eyes from the bright sky.

She gasped then, seeing something off in the distance.

‘What is it?’ Leroy asked slightly alarmed. ‘What do you see?!’

‘I see the horses!’ Candy Cake squeaked excitedly. ‘They are there! A great heard of them!’

Leroy’s frown lessened slightly, happy that they were back on task, and slightly closer to completing their quest.

‘Are they far?’ he asked tentatively.

‘Distance doesn’t apply here’ Candy Cake said back to him. ‘Things that seem far are close, and things that seem close are far. You don’t know how long it will take to reach it until you get there.’

‘That’s helpful’ Leroy grumbled.

‘Everyone!’ Candy Cake called dramatically, pointing in the correct direction. ‘*That* way!’

‘Great’ Leroy said flatly. ‘How do we get there?’

‘Isn’t it obvious silly?’ Candy Cake winked cheekily at him. ‘We bounce our way there.’

‘Of course we do’ Leroy replied, giving Candy Cake a wide and sarcastic smile. ‘You lead the way.’

‘Everyone!’ Candy Cake cried spinning dramatically in the air. ‘Follow me!’

She quickly darted off in one direction, leaving behind all the others, who struggled to keep up with her.

‘Slow down!’ one of them protested as they bounced like a giant flea in great arcs through the air. ‘We’ll lose you.’

Candy Cake didn’t slow; she only glanced back with a mischievous grin, using her magic to make her whole profile glow in a bright light, clear on even the brightest day.

(It was pink obviously, being her favourite colour. Pink pink pink.)

Candy Cake did a spin in the air, moving slowly as if underwater, she barrel-rolled to the side, forward rolled, cart-wheeled. She was having a lot of fun along the way, hovering high above the others as they followed, guiding them like a star.

In no time at all, they reached the heard.

Candy Cake descended, touching the ground lightly, as around her the guild members began to slow, stopping and forming a line as they observed the open land before them.

‘I present to you’ Candy Cake said reaching her arms out and beaming, ‘the heard.’

Waltz raised an eyebrow, grinning at this.

Before them, was a large mass of horse-like creatures, but of the kind none of them had seen before (except Candy Cake that is).

There was a pure white horse with a rainbow mane and tail, there was one with giant and very delicate-looking butterfly wings, another with a horn upon its head shaped like a mighty axe, a skeletal one with a ghostly mane and tail, one whose body seemed to be made up entirely of star-constellations, with a mane and tail that looked to be nothing more than gas sparkling in the air, one that looked entirely made of ice with red eyes, another with a mane and tail of pure fire, one that was on its top half, entirely covered in white feathers like a swan, on its bottom half it looked as if it were made of crystal, another with a horn like a sword and a tail like a whip, another that looked as if were missing its skin, with a body of pure muscle and a head like a skull with long teeth and white glowing eyes, another with no eyes at all, with a long slippery tongue hanging out, mighty wings on its back that looked more like rags than anything else, and a pair of smaller wings on its hind legs...

You get the point. There were tons of horse-like creatures, all of unusual and bizarre and some just plain frightening in design. But they all seemed harmless. Most didn’t seem to care about the beings that had suddenly appeared in their world, a few were curious, but all kept their distance.

‘Right’ Leroy sighed crossing his arms. ‘Where do we begin?’

‘I’ll go look for a sleipnir’ Candy Cake told them. ‘You look keep a look out.’

‘A look out for what?’ Leroy asked her.

‘Anything’ Candy Cake beamed sweetly back. ‘Everything.’

A split second later she vanished into thin air, leaving behind only pink fairy-dust.

‘Do you think this world is dangerous?’ Tom asked Leroy beside him nervously.

Leroy glanced back.

shrug

Tom looked away. ‘I guess there’s nothing left to do but wait’ he sighed.

Nearby, Waltz was already lying on his back on the soft grass with his hands behind his head, a foot propped on a knee as he hummed a tune merrily away to himself, eyes closed in contentment.

‘Have you been here before then?’ Kenneth asked Waltz.

Waltz paused his humming, opening his eyes and smiling.

‘I have’ he replied, ‘...a very long time ago.’

‘Is there anything here that could hurt us?’

‘Hmm’ Waltz thought aloud. ‘Are you a little scared of sea-horses?’

‘Um....no?’

‘Good’ Waltz sighed, closing his eyes again. ‘Then you should be fine...’

They stayed here for quite some time, though it wasn’t long before Leroy began to get fed up. ‘Where is she?’ he scowled.

‘Don’t worry’ Waltz replied lazily. ‘I’m sure she will be back soon.’ He paused then. ‘Or maybe she won’t be’ he added in voice of false alarm. ‘Maybe she has abandoned us and we are stuck here forever!’

Leroy took his shoe off and lobbed it at Waltz’s head. It bounced off the back of his skull and landed lightly on the purple grass.

It wasn’t long after that, that Candy Cake returned.

‘Hey’ she smiled happily down at the guild below her as she hovered in the air above them.

Leroy rose to his feet.

‘I hope you found something’ he told her shortly.

Candy Cake’s eyes glinted mischievously.

‘I sure did’ she replied. ‘But I need your help to get it.’

‘Why?’ Leroy asked suspiciously as the other members of the guild around him rose to their feet.

‘Because’ Candy Cake answered happily, ‘sleipnir...they *love* people. It would be far easier to approach with all of us. If anything, it would be thrilled to be taken from this world.’

Leroy frowned up at her.

The guild walked through the heard of strange horse-like creatures, guided by Candy Cake hovering above. The beasts all around them all parted to make room for them as they went by. The other member of the guild all seemed relaxed, only Leroy was on edge, deeply suspicious as he drifted forwards. He never once let his guard down.

They walked for a short while; Candy Cake led them away from the main heard and to a quiet location.

There was a pretty white tree growing beside a small lake. Drinking from the water on the edge of the lake was the beast they were looking for, it turned to face them as they approached.

‘Everyone’ Candy Cake declared, ‘I present to you...a sleipnir.’

The guild regarded it.

It was entirely grey in colour. An eight legged horse, entirely unremarkable in every other way.

‘There are’ Leroy began, ‘far more impressive creatures in the heard we’ve just passed through.’

‘True’ Candy Cake said descending in the air and coming to stand beside the sleipnir. ‘But many of those other creatures are hostile in temperament, and besides’ she added. ‘This one is friendly, and special, because it’s the fastest and most tireless horse in existence.’ She grinned happily at them, patting one of its eight legs. ‘It can run faster than a greyhound, and can do so for many hours.’ She grinned wider, seeing the awe now in their faces. ‘You could reach the other end of the world in just a few days.’

‘Are there any more of these creatures?’ Leroy asked suddenly, his interest piqued.

‘Sadly not’ Candy Cake answered.

‘Then how do they breed?’

Candy Cake turned to him. ‘This is not a species’ she told him. ‘All of the creatures you see here are mutations.’

‘So if you were to breed this with a regular horse...’ Leroy began.

‘The offspring would be a regular horse’ Candy Cake finished, ‘a normal old boring horse, just like so many other normal old boring horses. No’ she shook her head, touching the sleipnir’s neck gently. ‘This one is special.’

The creature turned, nuzzling into her as she spoke. It seemed to be as friendly as she said it was.

‘I’ve been keeping an eye out for one of these for many years’ Candy Cake went on. ‘I already have a buyer lined up. She will be so excited I’ve finally found one!’

‘Why can’t we take one of the other horses?’ Leroy asked, turning back to the heard behind them.

‘No’ Candy Cake spoke sharply. ‘We only take one, or else we will disrupt the balance. This world is very delicate.’

‘Oh’ Leroy groaned. ‘Conveniently vague reasons.’

‘Let’s go!’ Candy Cake giggled, acting as if she hadn’t heard him. ‘It’s time to return home!’

It was somewhat of a disappointment to be taken so abruptly from this other place, the guild had quickly grown fond of it, but sure enough in a flash of light they found themselves on familiar ground once more.

‘Home...’ Waltz sighed gazing at the world around them, ‘it’s where the heart is...’

In no time at all they found the buyer Candy Cake was talking about. In a large town they found a manor with large grounds.

‘This is the place?’ Leroy asked with a raised eyebrow.

‘Sure is’ Candy Cake grinned folding her arms.

They entered its grounds.

Candy Cake went away to find the master of the house, while Leroy and the rest of the guild wandered about in the gardens outside.

‘Wow’ Earnest said in awe as he gazed around. ‘Imagine owning such wealth.’

‘Yeah’ Trevor huffed beside him. ‘Must be nice.’

It wasn’t long after that when the ‘buyer’ came trotting out from the house excitedly.

The guild who had been guarding the sleipnir up until that point, all stared down curiously at the child that hurried towards them.

‘Is this it?’ the child said excitedly. ‘Is this what you were telling me about?’

Candy Cake appeared at her side, placing her hands upon the girl’s shoulders and whispering into her ear.

‘It sure is.’

She was young, looking to be only about twelve in age. She was beautifully dressed in rich clothing, with white-blond hair and blue eyes.

‘It’s wonderful!’ the girl declared.

‘Is this the buyer you’ve been talking about?’ Leroy asked doubtfully as Candy Cake lifted the girl and placed her gently upon the sleipnir’s back.

‘She is’ Candy Cake beamed. ‘Her name is Lunar.’

Her father appeared behind them, her mother following shortly after.

‘We thank you for your trouble’ the father said, speaking to Candy Cake as if the guild were invisible. ‘I’m sure you must have gone through a lot of effort to do this.’

‘Oh’ Candy Cake waved away. ‘It was nothing.’

‘Modesty’ the father smiled kindly, as the mother went over and patted the sleipnir her daughter sat upon. ‘And’ the father said reaching into his pocket and pulling out a very large bag of coins, ‘here is your reward.’

‘Why thank you very much’ Candy Cake said taking it from him and hiding it away.

‘Come on dear’ the mother said to Lunar. ‘Let’s take it to the stables.’

While the small family moved away, Leroy spoke to Candy Cake.

‘Where’s our share of the reward?’

‘Oh you don’t get any.’

‘What?’

Candy Cake turned to him slyly, holding her hands behind her back.

‘You didn’t do anything.’

‘Then why bring us along?’ Leroy glowered angrily now.

‘I needed a large group of people’ Candy Cake said. ‘That is why the sleipnir was so easy to bring here. It loves people, that is why it’s the best choice for Lunar. Plus I trusted Waltz.’ She winked at him.

‘But you said half the reward’ Leroy sneered.

Candy Cake waved to him, grinning happily. ‘I lied.’ She turned to Waltz. ‘I’ll see you later.’ She kissed him briefly on the lips, before stepping back and giggling, disappearing in a cloud of pink smoke.

The other guild members all glared at him.

‘What?’ Waltz shrugged.

‘Did you know she would do that?’ Richard asked him.

‘Of course not’ Waltz said defensively. ‘How could I?’

But none of them believed him.

They skulked past him moodily.

‘Nice one Waltz’ they grumbled.

He shrugged helplessly at them as they drifted by.

They walked on foot all the way back to the inn in which they currently resided, and each went about their own business.

They rested for a few days, until their funds began to get low, then they began searching for more work, and embarked on another quest.

Chapter Nine Too beautiful to Cage

Several months passed and the guild went about their daily lives, completing quest after quest and moving from one place to another. They were doing fairly well most of the time, the guild members were neither rich nor poor, but they made their way in the world, living as they did.

But winter was coming, and life was becoming a little harder, as it did every year when the weather began to grow cold. It was not a good time for the guild at this moment, several of the members had split off on individual quests to gather what little coin they could. Leroy was gone, along with about half of the guild. The other half stayed at camp, which had been set up as a temporary place to stay, nothing more than a few tents put up amongst a section of trees. This spot had been chosen because the forest here grew thick, and it kept the icy wind out.

Inside the forest was silent.

Waltz stood at the edge of the camp, holding a blanket tightly around him and over his head. It was bitterly cold, and his cheeks and nose and fingers were red, his breath a fog in the air before him. He glanced back at the camp behind him, he could see through the opening in one of the tents, Kenneth sleeping, near him the boy who guided him was sitting cross-legged, silently carving a figure of a bird in a piece of wood he had found.

Waltz glanced away.

They stayed for what felt like the longest time at this camp, trying to ignore the bitter cold.

One by one the other members of the guild were returning to them, bringing with them what coin they had. And at last, Leroy arrived.

He put the bag of coin he carried on the floor beside one of the tents. Shivering, he turned to address the rest of the guild.

‘I think I’ve found a big job for us’ he began.

‘What kind of job?’ Kyle asked him, sitting on a folded blanket on the floor and hugging his knees.

‘Do you remember several months ago we accompanied Candy Cake to retrieve that sleipnir?’

The guild listened to him, feeling suddenly a little doubtful as they remembered the particular mission where they missed out on their reward. A few of them glared at Waltz who ignored them all.

‘I was recently passing through a tavern’ Leroy continued, ‘when I heard the most unusual rumour.’

‘And what is that?’ Kennedy asked.

‘A creature has been sighted near here’ Leroy said, ‘a rare creature, one that would be worth a lot of money. A phoenix.’

‘A phoenix you say’ Kennedy mused, scratching his chin.

Waltz listened silently, he glanced to Leroy.

‘Yes’ Leroy said turning to Kennedy. ‘I’m sure it would be a lot of money if we sold it to the right buyer.’

‘I know just the right person’ Tristan said clicking his fingers. ‘There is a man I know of who lives near the capital. He collects mythical creatures as trophies. He’s got loads, manticors, chimeras, hippogriffs...even a mermaid. I hear she’s very beautiful.’ He paused then. ‘He’s filthy rich, obviously, or else how would he afford such treasures? His home is like a zoo.’

‘I think I know who you mean’ Leroy nodded. ‘He’s famous for it.’

‘Right’ Barry said thumping his fist into his open hand. ‘So we catch this phoenix and sell it to this guy for a butt-ton of money, then live in luxury for several months.’ He grinned. ‘It’ll be like one long holiday.’

‘Calm down’ Leroy told him. ‘Don’t let your imagination run off with you; we have to catch it first.’

‘So how do we do that?’ Tom asked the obvious question. ‘It can’t be easy to catch this thing or else everyone would be doing it, and how do we know the reward won’t be taken from us like it was with the siren. Remember that?’

The other members of the guild nodded mournfully at this. Leroy waited for silence before speaking again.

‘This time will be different’ he assured them. ‘Unlike last time, this mission is not advertised on a board, but a secret one. I’ve paid a lot of money for information on this task, the coin I’ve brought back is less than half of what I had before.’

The other members of the guild looked down at the large bag of coin, their eyes growing hungry.

‘Few other people know about this’ Leroy told them. ‘I am the only one willing at this time to wish to attempt retrieving it.’

‘Why?’ Trevor asked, raising his hand as if he were in a classroom asking the teacher a question. ‘Is it dangerous?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

Waltz tutted, rolling his eyes.

‘God forbid if anything is made easy for us.’

The others ignored him.

‘The phoenix has nested amongst a section of mountain where great colossi dwell. It will be very dangerous.’

‘Then how do we catch it?’ Richard asked.

‘The phoenix is dying’ Leroy told him. ‘You know how they live. They age, die and catch a flame, being re-born from the ashes. As long as we can get close to it, it will be easy.’

‘It won’t though will it?’ Waltz spoke up in a deadpan voice. ‘The colossi?’

‘It’s perhaps why the phoenix chose that spot to die’ Leroy agreed. ‘For protection.’

‘It’s not stupid then’ Waltz grumbled.

‘I imagine these colossi are pretty dangerous?’ Rude said to Leroy. ‘We don’t even know how many there are.’

Leroy crossed his arms.

‘It’s why no one else will take the quest’ Leroy spoke in a monotone.

‘Great’ Waltz declared clapping his hands together. ‘You mean no one else is stupid enough to attempt this?’ He laughed humourlessly. ‘We are all going to die!’

It was indeed as Leroy had said; only a short distance from their camp was the location they sought. They had no horses as they were expensive, almost all of the time the horses they did have were rented, and they rarely had money to afford such luxuries in winter.

Leroy led the way through the rocky mountains, a deep canyon cut into the rock allowed them to delve onwards, and the tall walls either side loomed threateningly over them.

‘Good place for an ambush’ Kyle noted out loud glancing above him.

The others shared nervous glances; Leroy just glared at him silently before facing ahead again.

‘How far is it?’ Tom asked quietly.

Leroy slowed to a stop, gazing ahead of him as their path split in two.

He looked first one way, then the other.

‘Oh come on’ Waltz called very unhelpfully from the back of the group. ‘You’re not lost are you? Say it ain’t so?’

Leroy ignored him. He lingered for a moment, before choosing a path.

The others followed.

All around them the snow which had started that morning, continued to fall silently. It was miserably cold, and many of the guild members were hugging their cloaks tightly to them.

They passed through the canyons without incident. Their path began to rise, leading them higher into the mountains.

They walked for a long time, until they came to a cave that was so deep, it blocked out all light from the sun. But the guild were not hindered by this at all, several of them instantly used their magic to light the torches they carried, holding them high in the air. One of them passed a torch to Leroy who led their group, and he held it before him, lighting their way.

They continued onwards.

Their path was winding, twisting and turning, until it began to level out, before sloping gently downwards as they came to a small cavern.

The guild formed a wall at the entrance to the cavern, staring in awe at what was before them, many of them extinguishing their torches.

The cavern was already brightly lit. Before them was the creature they sought, the phoenix.

A sad and sorry looking creature it looked towards the end of its life, scrawny and pale with large patches of missing feathers over its body.

The guild stared at it. One of them made a noise.

‘Aaaaawwwwww.’

The bird turned to them, sitting on a rock in the very centre of the cavern. It burst into flames suddenly, burning brightly.

When the flames died out, all that was left was a pile of ashes.

‘Quick’ Leroy hissed nudging Waltz beside him. ‘Pick it up.’

‘Um’ Waltz began uncertainly moving forwards. ‘Alright.’

He produced a dustpan and brush brought especially for the occasion, and began to sweep the ashes up, tipping them carefully into his pocket.

‘There’ Waltz said with satisfaction. ‘Safe and sou-’

There was a sudden rumble as the earth shook around them.

Waltz froze suddenly tense. He turned back to the guild.

‘What was that?’

No one spoke; they just stared at each other in alarm, simply waiting for whatever was to happen, to happen.

There were several moments of silence, and then, the deafening sound of rock against rock.

The entire cave moved around them, the walls turning and rising until they had left the ground completely.

It was then that the guild realised they were not inside a cave at all, but a hollow in the mountain, above which had rested a mighty beast made of stone.

‘The colossi!’ Leroy called as it found its feet, rising ever higher above them.

All around them the mountains were moving. There were many of them, though in the confusion and panic could not be counted. Several of the guild members had drawn their weapons, an automatic reaction when faced with a threat, though in this case it was a useless one.

The rocky beast above turned to face them.

With large feet, and great wings that had formed what they had thought was the wall of the cave, a long long tail and a great beaked head. It was a terrifying beast of massive size, with a body that looked like it was made of both rock and earth. Patches of grass grew over its body in places, even a small tree.

It looked down at them with bronze glowing eyes, and roared. A sound that seemed to come from the belly of the very earth itself, the guild members clapped their hands over their ears in pain at the sound.

The beaked colossi ceased its call, drawing its head back to attack. It lunged at them, attacking the guild with all its strength, but they were protected.

While the others had frozen in panic, Waltz had quickly regained control of himself, and at first it might have seemed that he had been saying a prayer, or reciting a spell. But in fact he was calling for help; from the being he liked the least in the world.

The witch that controlled him.

He had felt her smile at him, and knew he would pay the debt for her help later. But that didn’t matter now, all that mattered to him was saving his guild, and he knew that this was a threat unlike any they had faced before. If he didn’t do something, they would have died then. But at that moment the witch’s curse had become a blessing, and he was able to use her magic for the shortest time.

He threw up a mighty shield, a barrier that protected himself and his guild from the rest of the world. The guild looked about in wonder, realising they had not been attacked yet. And then they noticed the shield that Waltz had summoned.

‘Waltz...’ one of them uttered, ‘where did you learn such powerful magic?’

The colossi was clawing and tearing at the shield, but for all its efforts, it did not even put a dent in the spell.

Waltz glanced back at his guild, when normally he wore an expression of cocky surety and arrogance, now he wore an expression of fear, and that frightened the guild even more.

The shield flickered for an instant, and in this time, the colossi had managed to grab Waltz.

Waltz was able to cast the spell again as he was lifted in the air, the great bird's beak around his body. Waltz threw the spell downwards, using his strength to surround the guild in protective magic, caring only for their safety even as he was hauled away. Waltz moaned in agony as the colossi tightened its grip on him, its beak breaking his ribs.

Are you in need of assistance?

Waltz recognised the voice in his head as belonging to the witch. He could not speak to her now as the breath was forced out of him when his chest had been crushed by the colossi. Now he could only speak to her in his mind.

'Save me...' he begged.

But you already used all of the magic I gave you to protect the guild the witch replied calmly as the colossi carried him away. *Do you want some more?*

'Save the guild....save them...'

You know it will cost you. Do you want me to save them? The witch asked.

'Yes' Waltz thought. *'Kill the colossi....save the guild...'*

And yourself?

Waltz groaned, throwing up an alarming amount of blood as the colossi carried him further.

'The guild...' Waltz thought desperately.

As you wish.

Waltz felt powerful magic suddenly coursing through his body, of the kind he had never felt before.

Waltz used his sudden strength to part the jaws of the bird that held him, causing it great pain as he did so, his very touch burned the colossi. He summoned a grappling hook out of the air by magic, the glowing weapon stabbed the colossi around the back of the neck, and Waltz was able to swing free, soaring through the air in an arch he landed behind its head.

With no hesitation and acting purely on instinct, he summoned a spell he knew nothing about, killing not only the colossi below him, but every colossus that dwelt within the mountains around them.

With a great scream, the flying beast fell from the air, Waltz along with it.

He looked up at the sky above him, suddenly his old self again.

Waltz was unable to protect himself as he fell, hitting the mountain side with full force.

And then he knew nothing.

Leroy strode down the corridor, opening the door at the end without pause. It has been several hours since the incident, and Waltz had been taken to the first healers the guild could find.

No expense had been spared. He lay there in bed, having finally woken. He blinked wearily, gazing about him at his surroundings, feeling confused.

‘Hey’ Leroy spoke tentatively, approaching the bed slowly and resting his hands upon the edge as the healer left the room silently. ‘How do you feel?’

Waltz blinked slowly again, turning very gingerly towards Leroy, facing him now.

‘.....Leroy?’

Leroy smiled widely, a genuine expression.

‘I’m so glad you’re alright.’

Waltz blinked again, slowly.

‘I feel like.....’ he thought, his mind was working very slowly. ‘I feel like I’ve been digested twice over.’

‘You look worse than that.’

Waltz sighed deeply.

His body was bruised all over, the whites of one of his eyes was pure red, he suffered a concussion, and had several broken ribs, a broken collar bone, and cuts and severe grazes on every inch of his once flawless skin.

Waltz blinked again. He swallowed; his voice was a little hoarse.

‘Water...’

Leroy immediately reached for the jug beside his bed, pouring him a glass and helping him drink. Leroy brought the glass to his lips, holding the back of his head as Waltz took a sip.

He began to cough, and Leroy moved back, placing the cup back on the table.

When Waltz stilled again, he spoke.

‘How are the others? Are they all alright?’

‘They are alive because of you’ Leroy answered. ‘I don’t know what happened back there, maybe I don’t want to know and I don’t expect you to tell me either. But you saved our lives. If you hadn’t done whatever it was that you did, those colossus would have killed us all. But you killed them instead...all of them.’

Waltz stared at him; it wasn’t clear if he understood what Leroy was telling him.

‘You saved our lives Waltz.’

Waltz blinked again.

‘The phoenix...?’

Leroy bowed his head. Waltz looked down at his pocket; he moved to reach into it. Inside, he didn’t find the ash he had expected, but he felt something else there.

He took it gently, pulling it from his pocket.

It was a baby bird, with a single little red feather upon its head.

‘The phoenix’ Leroy said in shock. ‘I thought for sure that we had lost it.’

The baby bird cocked its head, looking about the room with its large eyes. It appeared perfectly healthy.

‘How...?’ Waltz sighed, gazing down at it. ‘How did it not die in the fall? I thought for sure...’

Leroy took the tiny little bird from him.

‘I’ll look after it’ he said. ‘You just stay here and rest.’

Waltz handed the little baby phoenix over to him, before lying back. His hand fell back down to the bed, and his body relaxed.

Waltz succumbed to a deep sleep, until he woke several hours later. But it was not to a figure that was welcome.

At first, he did not recognise this figure. But then she smiled, leaning forwards on the end of his bed.

‘How do you feel?’ she asked in a sly voice.

Waltz’s heart instantly stopped inside his chest, and he knew suddenly instinctively, who this was.

‘Witch’ he sighed. ‘So it’s you.’

The false healer raised her head. Today she appeared as a young woman with short brown hair. She was beautiful.

‘Waltz’ the witch began. ‘You’ve survived a great danger.’

Waltz looked down at her.

The witch smiles widely at him.

‘You have asked great things of me’ she said. ‘The rest of your guild is alive because of me. I now own their lives.’

Waltz stared at her. He said nothing.

The witch straightened up.

‘The rest of the guild trust you now like they have never done so before. They adore you.’

She glanced back at him with a grin, clearly amused by this. ‘You are like a saviour to them.’

She left the room without another word, and Waltz was consumed by a cold feeling of dread.

Chapter Ten

Sumaey

It was many weeks before Waltz was able to leave his room at the healers, and many more weeks before he was strong enough to take part in quests again. For the longest time he had felt like a burden to the others, and they had spent a great deal of money for the healers to make him better and to give him a proper bed while they slept out in the cold. But they did not complain, not once, for they all knew the true, and although Waltz hated to admit it he knew it too.

He had saved all of their lives, but what he didn't tell them was that they were now owned by the witch.

He kept that secret to himself.

'So' Leroy said to him with a grin, 'are you ready to go on your first quest in ages?'

Waltz glanced up at him, he was still a little sore in places, and couldn't move as easily as he could before the incident. But he felt so much better now.

'Yeah' he said eagerly. 'I want to have an adventure.'

Leroy's eyes glinted at this, and he turned to the rest of the guild around him.

'Alright boys' he called to them. 'Let's go!'

Waltz was at last allowed on another adventure. Only Kenneth the blind member of their guild stayed behind, listening to them go. Beside him was his guardian, the young boy.

'Keep a watchful eye' Kenneth spoke to their backs as the guild rode away, 'and come back safely.'

It was still in the midst of winter, and bitterly cold. The guild had to travel far on this particular quest, but the journey was comfortable enough. The phoenix they had found many weeks ago in the mountains had grown. Now it was a fully fledged bird, and it was beautiful. They brought it with them wherever they went, never releasing it from its cage for fear of losing it. It kept them warm in the cold nights as they travelled. The guild no longer lit fires anymore, but huddled around the phoenix instead, who always burned brightly. It would regard them with its human-like eyes as they did this, almost as if it were intrigued by them, and wondered what they were and what they were doing. Cold was a concept the phoenix did not understand.

The guild travelled to their destination, a small village on the edge of the map that was terrorized by horrible insect-like creatures. They were as large as horses, spitting green venom at its prey, and looked like a cross between a spider and a scorpion. Grotesque they were, but the guild managed to deal with them easily enough. Even Waltz who was recovering from his injuries had done his part.

The nests around the village were destroyed with small bombs, but the younger creatures that had already hatched and were at this time relatively harmless, Leroy did not kill, but sent away with magic, back to the deep forests where they had come from.

'What if they return?' Rude had asked Leroy.

'Then we will deal with them' Leroy replied. 'We don't just kill monsters because they cause trouble for humans, we try to make space for them and keep them apart from us. There is a line between beasts and humans, but I won't just simply kill all of them, after all, we share this world as they do.'

Waltz glanced at him as he said this, then looked away. But he said nothing.

The guild collected their reward, and returned to their camp.

When summer came, Waltz had recovered fully and was back to his old self again. But when the time came for the guild to sell the phoenix they had guarded all this time, they found they could not do it. It had bonded with each of them, and they realised it was just too beautiful a creature to be caged, and so they all agreed to release it.

They waited until nightfall before opening the cage. All of the guild members gathered around to watch as Leroy released the phoenix.

It spread its wings fully for the first time, its fire licking the bars of the cage.

It took flight, its burning profile bright as it rose swiftly in the dark sky.

The guild members watched silently as the reward they had worked so hard to obtain and risked so much for, flew away, never to be seen again. But not one guild member regretted letting it go, for it was the right thing to do.

Waltz watched the phoenix soar freely through the open sky, feeling warmth and joy in his heart. He smiled widely.

Suddenly a glow came from the centre of his chest, and he looked down at himself.

‘Not now...’ he groaned.

The rest of the guild around turned towards him just in time to see him fade away, something that by now they had seen many times before.

The next that Waltz opened his eyes, he stood before the witch.

That night, he began the task she set for him.

It was a dull and chilly night, perfect to add to his already sour mood. Waltz’s assignment for this evening was to infiltrate a great manor and kill the man who resided there. A greedy money grabbing dept collector that had ruined many people’s lives....or something of the sort.

Waltz lingered on the road before the manor for quite some time, simply assessing the situation from a safe distance. As usual the witch had given him very little detail about anything. As usual. He wasn’t sure why she did this, it could be to test him and make him more cautious, or because she wanted to keep him in the dark.

Waltz suspected the latter.

‘Curse that witch’ he muttered under his breath as he clung to the tree in the shadows.

‘Alright...’ he said to himself at last after growing tired of watching the manor. ‘Let’s get this over with.’

He slipped across the road quickly, if anyone within the manor happened to be looking out of any of the windows facing the road, all they would have seen would have been a brief shadow, and nothing more.

Waltz crept carefully through the bushes and the trees that grew around the manor. The whole property was encircled by a huge wall, and the gates at the entrance were tall and wrought iron things, menacing looking in the dark.

‘Got to find a way in’ Waltz mumbled to himself, ‘somewhere sneaky where no one will see me.’

It took him over an hour to circle the entire wall several times. The best place he found to enter was near the front gate. There was one tree in particular growing conveniently close to the wall, and if that wasn’t enough, ivy grew up this section of the wall; it was really thick and tough looking. Waltz stood there surveying the scene, weighing his options.

He decided to try climbing the tree first.

He quickly found the branches at the top were rotten, and after falling from several different branches and landing ungracefully in a tangled mess on the floor, Waltz decided to scale the wall using the ivy to climb.

He dusted himself off, pulling twigs and leaves from his white-blond hair and scowling, feeling thoroughly annoyed and a little hungry.

He sighed, stepping towards the ivy. He began to climb.

Tiny insects bit nastily at him as he climbed up, little beetles that had made their nests within the ivy tried to fend him off. One of them bit his finger, a particularly large and nasty one. Waltz drew a sharp intake of breath, pulling his hand back sharply. The insect had latched onto his finger with its pincers, like some sort of crab. Waltz furiously tried to shake it off. It only flew off his finger and away into the forest after several seconds of flailing, it was immediately after that, that an even larger one landed right in the centre of his face.

Waltz resisted the sudden urge to scream like a little girl, instead grabbing it and throwing it over his shoulder and into the dark woods behind him. He began to climb quicker, reaching the top of the wall then simply falling the rest of the way.

He picked himself up clumsily, having landed in a bush; his fall was softened a little. Waltz flailed around in the bush for several seconds, arms and legs flying in all directions before his feet found the floor.

He dusted himself off yet again, stepping out from the foliage and onto the open path.

There was a sudden strong gust of wind behind him and he heard the sound of something metal creaking. He turned, seeing with distain one of the iron gates at the entrance swing open in the breeze. It had been open all along.

Waltz turned away with a grimace. He made his way closer to the manor, glancing about him as he went. It was a beautiful manor, and grand, no doubt about it. But as Waltz observes his surroundings more closely he found them somehow lacking. There were many beautiful flowers in the beds around him, but there were many weeds also. Surely adept collector would have a garden that was pristine, with not a single blade of grass out of place, but in this garden certain areas looked completely forgotten and unloved. Waltz paused then, seeing a large tree from which a swing hung down from, on the ground near the tree were balls of various colours and sizes, and there were bats and hoops also. Behind the tree there was a rotting shed, the door was left open and inside, Waltz could see more outdoor toys, including what looked like a small climbing frame.

‘Children?’ Waltz muttered curiously.

He turned away, creeping forwards.

Have to find him. Have to find this adept collector and turn him into mince meat.

But when he reached the first window on the ground floor and peered in, he saw a strange sight indeed, one that seemed so out of place to the story he had been fed by the witch of a greedy adept collector with trophy wives and money spilling out of his ears.

The room inside was large, and even from outside when Waltz leant closer to the window he could feel the warmth from the large burning hearth in the room, within which were many children.

They were all of various ages, from small infants to young teens. They were playing games within the room, several different games within several different groups, while some read, some slept, and some drew pretty pictures.

Waltz knelt frozen just below the window as he peered in, narrowing his eyes.

What on earth is going on here?

He glanced up, seeing from the rooftop a drain pipe running down the side of the house.

Waltz tip-toed away from the window, grasping the pipe firmly with both hands, he began to climb.

It was a tiresome and gruelling task, his fingers quickly going numb with the cold as he slipped many times on the algae that grew on the drain, again, not something consistent with a dept collector swimming in cash. And the children....

Dam witch has been lying to me Waltz thought bitterly to himself. *But then again...* he thought as he clambered upwards, *has she ever told the truth?*

He shook his head, trying not to think of such things, but instead keep his mind on his task.

He reached the top floor, shuffling awkwardly to the side, slipping off the drain and holding onto the ledge for dear life. He regretfully dared a glance below him, before hastily looking back up to the sky.

Yup he thought humourlessly to himself. *If I fall from here its splat...end of story.* He bowed his head, breathing a steady sigh as he closed his eyes. He opened them again, gripped by a surge of fresh determination. He moved along the ledge, until he came across the first window.

It was dark inside and there was no one there. At first glance it appeared to be a child's bedroom. There were two beds, one against each wall on opposite sides, and shelves and shelves filled with an assortment of toys. Everything inside was kept tidy.

Still holding onto the ledge very firmly with one hand, Waltz with the other reached into his pocket, slipping his fingers into one of the many magical pouches he carried and taking a piece of the substance within. It was a colour-less gel that would stick to any surface except for human skin, and would react to any other substance by melting it, except for human skin.

Thank god Waltz thought as he pressed a small piece of it firmly against the window pane.

Second later the substance began to hiss quietly, and a small section of the glass melted quickly away as if it was nothing but a sheet of ice by a fire.

Waltz waited until the gel stopped reacting, before he reached forwards, slipping his arm carefully through the hole in the glass, and opening the latch from the inside.

The window swung gently open and Waltz crept into the room, as silent as a spider. He closed the window after him, drawing the curtains to hide the hole in the glass. He turned back to the room, his footsteps light as he made his way forwards.

It was indeed a child's room he found himself in. Upon the shelves were soft toys and colourful learning cubes, puppets, some basic musical instruments, even a real sword and shield.

'Soldiers have to start somewhere I suppose' Waltz mumbled to himself, tearing his attention away.

He reached for the door, turning the handle slowly and peering out into a large and brightly lit corridor beyond. He frowned at the little fires lit all around him, lamps burning cheerfully on the walls, realising there would be no place to find cover. He glanced one way down the corridor, then the other. It appeared deserted and was as silent as the grave. He didn't know which way he should go, and so he picked a random direction, deciding one path was as good as the other. He didn't exactly have a map of the manor.

Although that would be handy Waltz thought, fingering his sword as he walked boldly down the corridor, gazing all about him as he went. He approached a golden balcony; the blood-red carpet beneath him muffled his footsteps as he went. Before him on the floor below was a

large hall, and above a chandelier made of what must have been thousands of little crystals that shone as brightly as the sun over a set of symmetrical stairs that led up to the floor Waltz was on.

Waltz drew back sharply as he heard a sudden noise. Two children appeared then, chasing each other across the hall. Waltz lingered away from the balcony until the children moved on, running through an archway and to the next room. Silence rang once more.

He stepped forward, feeling a strong uncertainty stirring within him.

What is going on here?

And then he heard another sound. It was muffled and distant.

Waltz turned to it, listening hard.

Voices.

He turned away from the balcony, moving towards the sound.

He crept as silently as a mouse, making his way towards a set of double doors further down the corridor.

Waltz moved closer, tilting his head and pressing his ear against the cool wood.

He couldn't hear what the voices were saying, but he was able to identify a male and a female voice. The male voice sounded older, the female sounded younger.

There were footsteps from inside the room, approaching the door.

Waltz tensed slightly, stepping back, but he didn't move to hide.

The door opened and Waltz's sword flew out. The unfortunate man stared down the length of the blade towards this stranger as Waltz pressed the tip of the sword against the man's throat.

The man froze, the woman beside him screamed, but Waltz did not move. And then a voice came from downstairs.

'Father! Is everything alright?!'

Waltz stared back at the man, hearing the child's voice from the floor below. The man stared at Waltz, and after a few seconds when Waltz didn't move, the man spoke.

'I'm fine Henry!' he called. 'Lucy just saw a big spider, that's all. Go back to your games.'

The three remained in their positions for several more seconds, listening intently. But the boy seemed to have taken the man's word and gone away.

The man before him fixed Waltz with a steady look, he was clearly afraid and though he tried his best not to show it, Waltz could see his fists trembling slightly.

'Who are you?' the man asked Waltz bravely, as the terrified woman by his side clung to the doorframe, unable to move out of fear.

'I was just about to ask you the same thing' Waltz replied.

The man hesitated. 'But...' he began uncertainly. 'Surely you know who I am. That is why you have come, is it not? I must have wronged someone very important and powerful to receive this sort of visitor. Though I can't think of what I might have done.'

Waltz glanced to the woman briefly, before looking back at the man.

'Just tell me who you are' Waltz demanded of him.

'Can I go?' the woman beside him asked hopefully.

'No' Waltz shot. 'You stay right where you are.'

Her shoulders slumped.

'Go on' Waltz said. 'Tell me who you are.'

Waltz what are you doing? Came the witch's voice in his head which he ignored.

‘Me?’ the man said curiously. ‘Well I’m...no one....just no one...’

‘You *must* be someone of importance’ Waltz argued, stepping back slightly and lowering his sword. ‘Otherwise why would the witch want you dead?’

Waltz shut up!

‘Witch?’ the man blinked. ‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

Stop talking and kill him!

‘What of the children? Why are there so many children here?’

‘I care for them’ the man replied. ‘This is my home...but I run it like an orphanage. The children here are unwanted by their own parents, alone in the world and have no one else. I care for them until I can find a family who will take them from me. They are very happy here.’ He glanced to the woman beside him. ‘This lady was interested in one of the children, and older boy. We were just talking about-’

‘No don’t get me involved’ the woman said panicking now.

‘It’s alright’ Waltz sighed sheathing his sword and straightening up. ‘I won’t hurt an innocent man.’

You’ll pay for this.

‘And I won’t hurt a woman either’ Waltz said turning to her. ‘There is only one woman I wish to harm, and that is the one who sent me on this quest.’

The woman let out a heavy sigh, visibly relieved. She wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of a hand.

‘Thank heavens for that.’

‘You mentioned something about a witch?’ the man prompted.

‘Put it from your mind’ Waltz told him. ‘I’m sorry for intruding and frightening you. I think what you’re doing here is a great thing.’ He dipped his head apologetically. ‘I will leave now.’

Waltz strode swiftly down the corridor, walking out in the open. He marched down the stairs and right through the centre of the hall. He was spotted by several of the children who happened to be nearby. They watched him curiously, seeing the clothes that he wore and the weapon at his side. To many of the younger ones he was like a character out of their storybooks.

‘Is that a warrior?’ several mumbled.

‘I wonder if he has magic.’

‘I wonder if he’s part of a guild.’

‘I want to be just like him when I grow up...’

Waltz exited the manor through the front door, standing on the steps and sighing heavily. He looked up towards the sky, closing his eyes as he felt the first light drops of rain falling on him.

He felt happy, and suddenly free having defied the order of the witch.

‘I don’t want to be her mercenary any longer’ Waltz spoke to himself. ‘I am a free man.’

He still lived and breathed. The witch had not cast a spell on him as punishment for his disobedience, though it was well within her powers.

‘Maybe she will forget about me’ Waltz thought hopefully, walking away from the manor and not looking back. ‘Maybe she will never summon me again.’

It took him several days to walk back to the inn (their favourite inn) where the rest of his guild stayed, traversing across moorland and marshes and woodland and town. When he finally reached the quiet crossroads where the inn sat, tired and filthy and ravenously hungry, he found several guild members were outside waiting for him.

Leroy was the first to welcome him back.

‘Waltz’ he said with a tired smile. ‘I knew you would return.’

Immediately after that Waltz was given a bath, lots of food and a warm bed to rest, here he stayed for an entire day, before rising again the next morning feeling refreshed.

‘You know one of these days’ Tom said beside him as Waltz shovelled more waffles into his mouth, ‘you’re going to tell us where you keep disappearing off to.’

‘Not a chance’ Waltz glinted at him, pouring an entire jug of honey onto his plate. ‘Not in a millions years. Nope. No way.’

Tom frowned at him playfully. Nearby Leroy was smiling. It seemed that Leroy was genuinely glad to have Waltz back. Despite everything, Leroy honestly cared for Waltz, as he did for every member of his guild, even though he wouldn’t always show it.

It was breakfast now, and the guild was sitting at picnic benches outside in the warm sun.

Is everyone here? Came a voice in Waltz’s head that caused his heart to stop in his chest. *Good.*

He dropped his fork suddenly as his chest began to glow.

Waltz stared down at himself in horror, stumbling back from the table.

The other members of the guild all turned to stare, some gasping in shock at the sight of Waltz suddenly glowing.

‘No!’ Waltz begged, his face screwed up in terror and grief. ‘Please don’t!’

It’s too late came the witch’s voice. *You disobeyed me.*

Waltz threw his head back as he began to transform, growing massive in size. The guild watched in disbelief, some even in fear as Waltz was forced into his beastly self.

He took on a snake-like form, with shabby black skin and a huge mouth with many little sharp teeth. His eyes glowed orange, and there were vile looking spikes running all the way down his body.

‘No this can’t be happening!’ Waltz thought desperately. *‘Oh please!’*

The guild moved away in panic, forming a circle around him.

Waltz saw all their wide eyes on him. They couldn’t believe what they were seeing, what they had just seen.

Waltz hung his mighty head in sorrow. His secret was at last revealed, the one he had tried so hard to hide, and for so long. He was truly a terrifying sight to behold, a monster, like the ones they slew so often on quests.

Leroy was the first to approach him, doing so tentatively. He reached out cautiously to the creature, doing so bravely, not knowing how much of Waltz was still in there.

‘Waltz?’ he spoke softly. ‘Is that you?’

Waltz dipped his head, great tears brimming in his eyes and spilling down his scaly cheeks.

Leroy touched the side of his face, feeling the warm tears upon his hands.

His profile began to glow again, and Leroy drew back. Waltz transformed back to his normal self. He stared back at the rest of the guild in misery, reaching up to his face to wipe away a tear with the back of his hand.

He went inside after that to be alone, while the rest of the guild outside whispered among themselves.

He stayed in his room for hours, deep in thought and consumed with worry, until he realised something.

Waltz had been lying on his bed. He sat up slowly, listening hard.

It had suddenly occurred to him, that he had not heard a single sound for several hours, which was completely out of the ordinary at this inn. Despite it being fairly quiet at this time, there were usually some noises of some description throughout the day.

But Waltz heard nothing.

Feeling a sliver of trepidation, Waltz swung his feet off the edge of the bed, rising and moving across the room.

It was utterly silent, and as Waltz moved down the corridor and towards the stairs, his trepidation grew to fear.

He descended the stairs, looking for one of the staff, a waiter or barmaid. But there was no one.

Briefly he headed to the kitchen, only to find that it at first appeared to be empty. But when he rounded one of the tables, he saw with horror a body lying on the floor.

It was one of the cooks, clearly dead at first glance though bearing no obvious signs to what had killed him.

Waltz baulked.

He immediately turn-tailed and ran, heading as fast as he could back outside to where he left his guild last, only to find them dead. Every single one of them.

Like the cook in the kitchen, they bore no signs of injury, but it was clear by their pale skin and blue lips, that nothing could be done to save them. They were all already long gone.

‘Oh no...’ Waltz uttered in shock and disbelief, seeing Leroy dead before him. ‘...What have I done...?’

Then there came a voice from inside his head.

Disobey me again, and the next time it will be your brother.

Waltz turned and walked away, taking with him only the clothes he carried on his back, and leaving everything else behind.

He walked for days through the wilderness, heading in no particular direction, pausing only to drink from the rivers and eat only the tiniest scraps to stop himself from starving, though he felt no appetite.

He walked until he came to a particular point in one of the forests, where he saw something he had never seen before.

There was what looked at first to be a great comet falling from the sky. Waltz tilted his head up, shielding his eyes as he squinted to see it better, gasping in surprise when he realised it was not a falling pile of rock as he had first assumed, but a woman.

‘Hu?’ he said brushing his hair back.

He took several steps back as the woman fell from the heavens, landing a short distance away with an almighty crash.

Waltz hung back in the echoing silence that followed, before making his way eagerly a few seconds later, heading to the spot where she had fallen.

‘What wonderful find have I discovered?’

He ran to a clearing nearby where the earth before him dipped sharply in a bowl-shape. Within the bowl, surrounded by the trees, were several great boulders, in the centre of which was a smooth patch of earth that was softened by ash. Rising from this bed and grasping her head was the woman, her body hunched over as she wobbled precariously.

Waltz stared in disbelief at this spectacle he saw before him.

A woman fallen from the sky.

And what a woman!

She was gorgeous, dressed all in red with long brown hair (for more details please refer to the cover, she should be easy enough to find – she is the only woman on the cover, and the only one dressed all in red :) you're welcome)

Waltz began to hastily count on his fingers, trying to figure out the date.

‘Is it my birthday today?’ he wondered aloud. ‘Oh well’ he shrugged, making his way down the rocks towards her.

Waltz stumbled then, getting a better look at her large chest and scantily clad frame.

At that moment he suffered a horrific nose bleed.

The woman noticed him suddenly, seeing the blood pouring from between his fingers as he tried to stem the flow.

‘Oh’ she said immediately adopting a look of disgust as she surveyed Waltz’s filthy and muddy profile. ‘It’s an ant. I’ve never seen you up close before.’

‘What?’ Waltz scoffed, cleaning himself up. ‘Are you some sort of celestial being?’

‘Perhaps’ the woman said, straightening up and tilting her head back to the sky, ‘the truth is...’ she began, ‘I don’t really remember...’

‘What’s your name?’

‘I...I don’t know.’

‘You don’t know your own name?’ Waltz said incredulous.

‘I...the woman began uncertainly. ‘I don’t remember...’

‘Well how abouts I call you Sumaey?’ Waltz offered, extending a hand. ‘Hello Sumaey. I’m Waltz. It’s nice to meet you.’

She regarded him with the same sneer and look of disgust as she did before.

Eventually she sighed, dropping her head slightly and turning to face him.

She extended her own hand, and shook his in greeting.

‘Charmed’ she said.

Chapter Eleven
Where to go from Here

Waltz strolled down the road whistling to himself and twirling a twig in his hand as he went. A few steps behind Sumaey followed, watching him closely and frowning as she stared at the back of his head. Her brow furrowed in annoyance.

‘Where are we going?’ she asked sulkily.

‘Hmmm’ Waltz replied. ‘Don’t know.’

Sumaey fell silent as Waltz continued to whistle.

They walked on for a few more seconds, before Sumaey spoke again.

‘Where were you heading before you met me?’

‘Nowhere in particular.’

Sumaey ground her teeth, glaring at him, her brow wrinkling further.

‘If you’re not heading anywhere then why are you out here in the first place?’

‘I’ve nowhere else to be’ Waltz sang back.

Sumaey halted suddenly; crossing her arms as her patience wore ever thinner.

‘Don’t you have a family or something?’ she asked him. ‘Don’t you have a job? Don’t you live anywhere?’

Before her Waltz slowed to a stop, his tune coming to an end as he lowered the twig he carried.

He turned back to Sumaey.

‘Yes, sometimes, and no.’

He turned away and continued to walk.

‘I’m not taking another step’ Sumaey declared loudly, ‘until you’ve decided where we are heading!’

Waltz sighed wearily, turning back to her.

‘And I’m hungry’ Sumaey added. ‘And you smell. When was the last time you took a bath?’

Waltz sniffed himself self-consciously as Sumaey glared. He looked to her again, giving her his most dazzling smile.

‘I’ll set up camp for us’ Waltz offered with a grin. ‘We just need to find somewhere decent to stay. Now let’s keep walking until we find a suitable spot. How does that sound? Do you like that idea? That sounds great doesn’t it? Good. Onwards’ he pointed happily. ‘*That* way! Let’s go!’

And so he continued walking in the direction he had been going before.

Sumaey sighed tiredly as Waltz soldiered on. She uncrossed her arms and walked after him, following him wherever they were going.

A short while later, Waltz found a patch of woodland not too far from the road that pleased him enough to rest there, and a short while after that, he was lying on his back with his hands folded behind his head and his feet propped up against the low branch of a tree. Beside him

burned a small fire, and on the other side sat Sumaey, hugging her knees to her chest and glaring at Waltz disapprovingly.

‘You call this a camp?’ she said at last.

‘Hm?’ Waltz said, stirring from his nap. ‘Did you say something?’

Sumaey’s brow furrowed even further.

‘I said...’ she began less than patiently, ‘...do you call this a camp?’

‘Yes’ Waltz answered happily, resting back with a happy grin upon his face as he snuggled into the earth contently. ‘It’s rather comfortable don’t you think?’

‘A proper camp is supposed to have some proper shelter like some tents or something, and don’t you have any supplies? Where’s all your equipment, your *clean* clothes and weapons? You’re supposed to be an adventurer, where’s all your gear? What if we get mugged?’

‘Mugged?’ Waltz repeated turning his head to face her. ‘And what are they going to steal?’

Sumaey gave him a level expression.

‘Good point’ she conceded. ‘But what if a monster attacks us, how are you going to defend yourself?’

‘Magic’ Waltz answered simply. ‘I have magic.’

Sumaey sighed wearily, turning away.

‘Where is the rest of your guild?’ she asked him. ‘I don’t believe you go on dangerous quests on your own, you’d never survive.’

‘They’re dead.’

Sumaey looked back at him, blinking in shock.

‘Tell me about yourself’ Waltz spoke hastily before she had time to question him. ‘I saw you fall from the sky. What happened, and where did you come from?’

Sumaey’s hand went to her head, and she frowned furiously as she struggled to remember.

‘My memory is blank’ she said, ‘nothing is coming back to me. I don’t even know who I am myself.’

‘How exciting’ Waltz chattered happily, rolling over to his side to see her better. ‘You are like a mystery wrapped in a riddle and cloaked in a conundrum with your inscrutability and vagueness...’

Sumaey gave him a look at if he had suddenly transformed into a giant slug.

‘I can’t wait to find out more about you’ Waltz continued, drawing little circles in the ground with his finger. ‘This is going to be fun.’

‘Are you trying to flirt with me?’

‘Why is it working?’

His chest suddenly began to glow. Sumaey looked down at him in surprise and shock.

‘Oh balls’ Waltz uttered as his profile began to fade. ‘Meet me in Twilight To-’

And then he was gone.

Sumaey blinked in confusion at the spot where Waltz had been lying not seconds before, the leaves still pressed to the shape of his body where he had been.

She raised her head slightly, glancing about her wide-eyed in case he would appear. But he was nowhere to be seen.

Sumaey bowed her head then, hugging her knees tighter to her chest.

‘Twilight Town?’ she said.

The problem was however, that Waltz in the short time that he had to convey his message, was unable to explain exactly where Twilight Town was, and more importantly, how far away it was.

It took five days to find someone to ask directions (in which time Sumaey learnt to her dismay that she had been going in the wrong direction) and then it took another five days to actually get there, travelling a variety of different ways. On foot, by carriage, even going so far as to pretend being a servant so she could gain access to one of the shabby little boats that crossed the river (not that she was entirely convinced she was fooling anyone) but at long last, and feeling more than a little irate, she reached her destination.

She slowed to a stop at the gates of the town, which were open and welcoming, seeing a huge sign hanging above the road.

Welcome Folks to Twilight Town

‘Finally’ she sighed wearily, ‘....I made it...’

A short while after that, when she had made her way to what she thought must have more or less been the centre of the town, she leant against a signpost built beside a little stone bridge, with the constant traffic going back and forth all around her.

She sat hunched with her arms crossed and her stomach growling loudly.

She drew a deep breath, glaring furiously at the ground and feeling thoroughly mad.

‘Stupid git’ she grumbled under her breath, speaking through gritted teeth. ‘Where the hell is he?’

And then there came a sudden voice, loud and jovial.

‘Hey! You made it!’

Sumaey tilted her head up, seeing Waltz waving at her from the roof of one of the nearby buildings.

‘I knew I would find you from up here!’ he grinned widely at her, taking a bite from a piece of beef jerky.

Sumaey unfolded her arms, straightening up and snarling.

‘You porridge-brained idiot! Do you have any idea what I’ve been through?!’ She hollered.

‘I’ve been living on berries for and sleeping in trees for days! Do you have any idea how many monsters there are in the woods you worthless idiot! I have half a mind to beat you with a stick like the donkey that you are you stupid half-wit! I hope you evaporate and slip into a coma!’

‘Woah’ Waltz mumbled, showing his hand in submission and taking a step back. ‘Take it easy.’

‘Don’t tell me to take it easy you moron!’ Sumaey politely informed him, grabbing the nearest thing at hand and throwing it at him, the nearest thing happened to be a cat.

Waltz managed to dodge the unfortunate feline as it sailed through the air with claws flailing; it landed safely on its feet in the next street before running away.

Sumaey was just searching about her looking for something else to throw, when Waltz threw back something to her.

‘What's this?’ Sumaey asked curiously, her temper suddenly stilled as she caught it.

She opened the sweet smelling sack, seeing inside an assortment of pies and pastries.

‘Food!’ she cried, immediately breaking into a smile.

She glanced up at Waltz grinning widely.

Waltz let out a sigh, putting his hands on his hips and finally relaxing.

It was safe to come down now, and he did so, sliding down the roof and landing lightly on his feet. He approached Sumaey, beaming back at her.

‘Thank you for waiting for me’ he said. ‘And I'm sorry for any trouble I put you through.’

A short while later and the pair were sitting at a table in a street corner. Sumaey was slurping on a milkshake, while Waltz in an attempt to look as sophisticated as possible was sipping a cup of tea.

‘So’ Sumaey voiced. ‘Where do you want to begin?’

Waltz glanced up at her, blinking curiously. ‘Begin?’

‘You’ve got a lot of explaining to do’ she informed him. ‘First of all...why did you leave me?’

Waltz sighed wearily, bowing his head and staring at his own reflection within his cup.

‘Leave...’ he mumbled. ‘It was not by choice.’

His hand went to his chest subconsciously, and he felt a great weight there.

‘I am...’ Waltz mumbled reluctantly, ‘...in the service of a witch.’

‘A witch?’

‘She is very powerful’ Waltz grumbled, sitting slumped forwards with his elbows on the table, stirring his spoon around his cup moodily. ‘She has complete control over me, and can summon and dismiss me as she chooses. I do jobs for her, the kind of jobs no one else wants to do...it is.....dishonest and cruel work.’

For a moment it looked as if he would say more, but he pursed his lips then, lifting his cup and sipping his tea quietly.

‘Why do you serve her?’ Sumaey asked, tilting her head and raising an eyebrow.

‘I have no choice. She has control over me. She owns me in body, soul and mind.’

Sumaey watched him closely, waiting for him to elaborate.

Waltz sighed wearily, bowing his head in thought before facing her again.

‘A long time ago’ he began, ‘I fell in love with a woman I thought I would spend the rest of my life with. She was unlike anyone I'd ever met before, perfect in every way, and I felt like we were destined to be together.....but things didn't turn out that way.’ He fell silent for several moments, before speaking again. ‘I was an adventurer, even way back then, and was part of a guild. I would do all sorts of dangerous things, things she couldn't even have imagined.’ He paused. ‘One day...she went out looking for me when I was on a dangerous quest.....in a dangerous place. She was attacked and mauled by a beast. I managed to save her...but she was disfigured...and found herself ugly. But I didn't care...I still thought she was beautiful...I still loved her as I did before.’ Waltz fell silent again, eyes glazed over as he remembered this woman. ‘She couldn't accept the way she had become, and so sought the

help of a witch to make her beautiful again, in exchange for her soul. She accepted.....I don't know why. To save her I switched places with her, the witch only agreeing because I was more valuable to her...more useful, being a warrior.' He smiled humourlessly. 'I now belonged to the witch. I signed a contract with her, agreeing to serve her until the day I die and my body rots. It was a daunting thing for me to do back then, but I was glad to do it if it made my love happy.' He sighed. 'She was beautiful again, her body and face perfect...as if the accident had never happened.' He blinked slowly, reciting the next part of his tale. 'One day, she caught the eye of a rich lord who promised her the world. He was so handsome...and he came from a sophisticated and noble family. Me?' he shook his head. 'I just slayed monsters in a guild. I was nothing compared to *him*. And so, she left me...despite what I did for her.'

Sumaey watched him silently as he spoke, feeling something different towards him.

'I have never settled down since' Waltz said. 'I have never truly loved a woman again.'

'Have you tried to free yourself from the witch's contract?' Sumaey asked tentatively.

For a long time Waltz stared down at his tea, breathing deeply and slowly.

And then he looked up at Sumaey smiling. There were tears glistening in his eyes.

'The one time I have ever disobeyed her' he said, voice trembling, 'she killed my entire guild, after forcing me to reveal my other self to them, the beast I turn to to do her dirty work.'

He raised his hand, brushing the tears away with a fist.

'Anyway' he said continuing to smile, 'tell me about yourself. I know nothing about you.'

Sumaey sighed deeply at that.

'I'm sorry' she said. 'What I told you before was true. I have no memory. I don't know who I am or where I come from.....I don't even know my true name.'

'How strange' Waltz pondered aloud.

'Out of interest' she began, 'why did you call me Sumaey. What made you pick that name?'

'Oh' Waltz said distractedly. 'Sumaey was a pet pigeon I once had. She was a really loyal pet to me.'

Waltz instantly flinched as Sumaey banged a fist on the table.

'You named me after a f***** *pigeon*?!'

'Sorry!' Waltz said hastily, waving his palms at her. 'It was the first thing that came to mind!'

Sumaey sat back heavily with a huff.

'So what are you going to do now?' she asked sullenly.

'I don't know' Waltz grinned apologetically, glad that she had calmed somewhat. 'I hadn't really thought about it.'

'Do you have a family?'

Waltz hesitated.

'No...I mean yes I...' he smiled sheepishly. 'I don't have a wife or any kids if that's what you mean. I only have parents. No siblings.'

'Hm.'

'They live a long way from here though' Waltz went on. 'I don't get to see them very often.'

'Then why don't we go there then?'

'Why?'

‘Well what else were you planning to do?’

Waltz hesitated. ‘I don’t want to go home’ he said at last. ‘At least not yet.’

‘Why not?’

‘I have my reasons’ Waltz mumbled turning away. ‘Let’s just say my father wants me to do something I don’t want to do.’

‘Is it to get married?’

‘No. I want to keep doing what I’ve been doing for so long.’

Sumaey clicked her fingers then. ‘Hey I have an idea! Why don’t you form your own guild?’

Waltz stared at her hard, brow furrowed and mouth open. His expression brightened suddenly and he clicked his fingers.

‘Hey I’ve just had a great idea!’ he said. ‘I could form my own guild!’

‘Ugh’ Sumaey turned away glaring.

A man approached their table then.

‘Hey’ he said leaning over them and staring at Waltz. ‘Are you Waltz?’

Waltz stared up at him in surprise.

‘Uh...yeah?’

The man punched him in the face.

Sumaey stumbled back from her chair in shock as Waltz caught by surprise fell to the floor.

‘What the hell?!’ she exclaimed, tensing suddenly as she noticed several figures advancing around them.

On the ground, Waltz was gingerly picking himself up; using the table he slowly hauled himself back to his feet.

‘What was that for?’ he groaned painfully.

‘That was for breaking my sister’s heart’ the man snarled.

‘Your sister?’ Waltz repeated.

‘Remember Cindy?’

Waltz stared at him for a few seconds. And then his eyes widened.

‘Oh crap.’

The man grabbed Waltz by the front of his shirt roughly, pulling him closer and getting ready to hit him again.

Sumaey moved forwards to help but was suddenly grabbed from behind by one of the men. Without a moment’s hesitation she threw her head back sharply, smacking the face of the man behind her, his nose cracking on impact. He stumbled back in surprise, holding his injury, but Sumaey did not hesitate. Her foot shot out to the side and with all the strength of a stallion, she kicked the nearest man in the groin. The unfortunate man made a very unmanly noise in protest as he hunched his body over, holding himself. He would never ever have children again. But before the man had even fallen to his knees, Sumaey spun around, fist shooting out and punching the nearest man on her other side in a very unladylike, aiming for his jaw as another of the men shouted ‘get her!’

Another man grabbed her by the arm, she shot her head towards him, instead of pulling away from him she grasped him tightly back, holding him firmly and pulling him towards her as her foot shot out again, delivering an agonising kick in his side. The man doubled over in pain.

Sumaey finally released him, whipping around towards Waltz.

‘Waltz!’

But he was grinning back at her, dusting his hands as several figures around him were in various degrees of disability.

‘Piece of cake’ he winked.

Around them people were staring in shock and disbelief at the group of fallen men, in the centre of which stood a man with shaggy white-blond hair and a skimpily dressed woman in red.

‘Uh-oh’ Waltz mumbled. His hand shot out and grabbed Sumaey by the wrist. ‘Let’s go’ he hissed, dragging her away. ‘We’ve drawn too much attention to ourselves.’

They ran from the area, Sumaey making her way hastily after Waltz as they sprinted around the corner and out of sight.

They stopped a short distance away when Waltz decided it was safe enough, leaning back against the wall in a quiet alley and breathing heavily.

Waltz turned to Sumaey, grinning at her. She turned back to him, smiling in turn.

‘That was sort of fun’ she said.

‘Yeah’ he breathed. ‘It was.’

He sighed, bowing his head and straightening up.

‘I didn’t realise you could fight like that’ he said. ‘You did pretty good...for a girl.’

‘I was going to say the same thing about you....sexist jerk...’

‘Hey I’ve just had a fabulous idea!’ Waltz declared loudly, beating his fist into his palm. ‘I need to form a new guild, and you need someone with the knowhow to help you remember who you are...someone who knows people...knows the land so on and so forth.’ He paused, grinning at her slyly. ‘Why don’t we team up?’

‘What?’

‘Come on. It’ll be great’ Waltz continued merrily. ‘We’ll make one hell of a team, I just know it. I need to be part of a guild to earn decent money, and at this point it would be the perfect time to form my own guild, but to be officially recognised there needs to be at least six members to form a new guild. Only when I am officially recognised will I be able to take on contracts.’

‘Hu?’

Waltz extended hand, offering it to Sumaey to shake.

‘Do you accept this invitation to join my new guild? I don’t have a lot, and we will have to start small.....but in time we can form one hell of a reputation, we might even do well for ourselves...become famous...like celebrities....like the stronger guilds...what do you say?’

Sumaey stared at him, with his blackened eye he had earned from the fight and his shabby clothes.

‘And you will help me learn who I am and where I came from?’ she asked dubiously.

‘Absolutely’ he beamed, still holding his hand out. ‘We will work together to help each other out.’

She stared down at his hand.

‘Do you accept’ he grinned, ‘as the first member of my new guild, to face whatever adventures we may?’

Sumaey frowned at him. Then she sighed, dipping her head slightly.

‘Fine’ she said, reaching out to shake his hand. ‘I accept.’

‘Great!’ Waltz beamed joyfully, shaking her hand vigorously. ‘Welcome aboard!’

Chapter Twelve A New Beginning

Several days passed in which Waltz and Sumaey spent their time relaxing. They slept indoors and were served breakfast using what little money Waltz had been given by the witch. It was quite an adventure getting to know one another and spending so much time together. Waltz on the first night made the mistake of booking a single room with a double bed. When Sumaey saw this, she turned and gave him a disapproving glare.

‘What?’ Waltz had shrugged. ‘A single room is cheaper.’

He slept on the cold hard floor that night while Sumaey lounged out on the double bed happily, stretching out in all directions in a very cat-like manner.

The next morning they stood side by side in the tiny bathroom before the mirror. Sumaey brushed her teeth while Waltz beside her gargled some mouthwash.

She finished brushing her teeth, then washed her face and hands and brushed her hair.

She turned to Waltz with a glare. He was still gargling.

With his head still tilted back he glanced at her happily, the edges of his lips curled in a sly grin.

She stared at him with a level expression.

Her hand reached out and she pinched his nose.

Waltz began to panic, flailing around and spitting mouthwash everywhere.

At breakfast the pair sat at the dining area. Waltz waved at the waitress who sailed over to their table quickly, drawn by his smile.

‘Good morning’ Waltz said politely to her. ‘May we please have some porridge?’

‘No dear’ Sumaey interrupted loudly. ‘You owe me for leaving me out in the woods alone remember?’ she turned to the waitress. ‘Two full breakfasts please.’

The waitress bowed and left hastily.

Waltz turned to Sumaey, opening his mouth he was about to protest at the cost of the order just placed, when he saw Sumaey’s expression.

He quickly closed his mouth, choosing wisely to stay silent.

When the breakfasts had been brought to them, Waltz shared a wink with the waitress before she placed their food on the table.

‘Awww’ Waltz said staring down at his plate. ‘Hey Sumaey, look at these baby sausages, look how small they are.’

She raised her head.

‘I’ve seen smaller.’

The waitress stifled a giggle as she moved away, though she made it all too obvious.

Waltz stared at Sumaey flatly, totally unimpressed.

‘Oh come on’ Sumaey smirked, turning her attention back down to her food. ‘You laid that out for me; all I did was nod it into the net.’

When the money had run out, Waltz and Sumaey left the town. They sat on the edge of the forest nearby, gazing out onto the open plains and the town a distance away they had just come from.

Sumaey lay on her front facing Waltz, while Waltz leant back against a tree with his arms folded behind his head, one foot propped up against a knee and waving to a silent tune in his head.

Sumaey watched him for the longest time, waiting for him to do something. Eventually she decided to speak.

‘We’ve run out of money.’

‘Hm?’ Waltz opened his eyes to glance at her, before sighing deeply and closing them again.

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘You’re supposed to be forming your own guild. Shouldn’t you be looking for members?’

‘It’s not that easy’ Waltz answered.

‘Why not?’

Waltz opened his eyes.

‘It’s very hard to start up a new guild’ Waltz said. ‘You have to form a reputation in order for people to be interested in joining you.’

‘How do you do that?’

‘By completing quests.’

Sumaey frowned in thought. ‘But.....how do you complete quests without a guild’ she asked him. ‘You told me to be officially recognised there need to be at least six members of a guild, only then can you take on contracts.’

‘Yeah’ Waltz mumbled, closing his eyes. ‘You could get into a lot of trouble with the bureau for working illegally.’

Sumaey fell silent for a moment.

‘Then how are you able to form a reputation to get people to want to join you if you are not allowed to take on contracts...when you have to take on contracts to form a good reputation to get people to want to join your guild in the first place....’

Waltz opened his eyes again, glancing to her with a smile of amusement.

‘Therein lies the problem.’

Sumaey huffed moodily, arms folded before her, chin resting on the leafy ground.

‘That’s stupid. How did your old guild leader form his guild?’

‘He knew people’ Waltz answered without pause. ‘He was able to form his own guild without completing quests. It’s difficult, you need to be someone of some degree of importance or recognition to begin with, or bribe people with money, you know....I offer you money and if you join my club we can all make more money together and have marvellous adventures along the way...and that sort of thing.’ He sighed contentedly. ‘Luck and timing also plays a big part of it.’

‘So what’s your plan then?’

‘I will bide my time until an opportunity presents itself.’

Sumaey groaned wearily, rolling over to lie on her back and staring up through the branches to the blue sky above.

‘So what are we going to do for money?’

Waltz paused.

‘I guess I wait until the witch summons me again, and then I’ll use whatever money she decides to give me to survive.’

‘And if she doesn’t summon you for ages?’ Sumaey asked.

‘I guess I could learn to play the violin and play while you dance in the streets for coins.’

Sumaey scoffed, turning away sharply.

‘Forget it.’ She fell silent for a moment, before glancing back at him. ‘What’s the longest time it’s been for the witch to summon you?’

Waltz frowned in thought.

‘A year’ he said at last.

‘Great’ Sumaey moaned. ‘If I’m lucky I’ll starve to death...or die of exposure.....or boredom.....’

‘Shhh’ Waltz breathed deeply. ‘Don’t talk, just enjoy the peace.’

Sumaey blinked slowly, listening to the gentle breeze and the sound of the birds singing in the trees around them.

She sighed deeply, trying to ignore the rumbling in her stomach, and closed her eyes.

Sumaey lay there in the warmth of the sun for several minutes, her mind beginning to drift.

She felt a strange sensation after a time, a burning sensation that scorched every inch of her skin, seeping into her flesh and reaching every organ.

She opened her eyes.

Sumaey sat up then, turning to look at Waltz.

‘I’ve just had a sudden thought’ she said to him. ‘What in this world is stronger than a witch?’

Waltz was listening to her intently as she spoke; Sumaey knew this by the way his brow furrowed slightly. She could almost hear the wheels and cogs in his head turning.

When he didn’t answer, she spoke for him. ‘A wizard.’

A few seconds later, Waltz opened his eyes.

‘They exist in this world don’t they?’ Sumaey continued. ‘I’m sure they do.’

Waltz sat up suddenly, unfolded his arms as he stared with eyes unfocused at the landscape before him.

‘Perhaps’ Sumaey voiced tentatively, speaking aloud, ‘perhaps there is someone out there who could help you.’

‘Sure’ Waltz said, speaking at last, ‘...for a price.’

He sighed, bowing his head.

Sumaey’s expression dampened.

‘I’m afraid to try’ Waltz admitted, ‘...because of what happened last time. She has taken everything from me.’

Sumaey raised her head slightly.

‘So what do you have left to lose? Why not fight her again?’

‘Because...’ Waltz whispered, narrowing his eyes, ‘...she has threatened to harm my brother next.’

A silence passed between them, a silence in which even the wind seemed to still and the birds fell quiet.

‘So you *haven’t* lost *everything*.’

Waltz turned back to her.

‘In any case’ Sumaey went on, ‘we have to find a job soon. If I have to sleep in a tree one more time...I will think of something very horrible and unsavoury to do to you to make you regret it.’

‘Fine’ Waltz grumbled looking away. ‘Hey! I’ve just had a marvellous idea!’ he declared.

‘Why don’t we find a wizard?’

Sumaey groaned into a hand.

Chapter Thirteen

The Wizard

‘So’ Sumaey began as they wandered leisurely through the woodland a short time later, ‘how do we find a wizard?’

Waltz hummed thoughtfully to himself, staring up at the branches above and tapping his chin as he pondered. ‘Well...’ he began, ‘to find something...we need to know a little about it in order to know *where* to find it.’

Sumaey slowed to a stop, turning towards him.

‘So?’ she raised an eyebrow. ‘What do you know about wizards?’

‘If they are anything like witches’ Waltz spoke slowly, thinking out loud, ‘then I perhaps know enough to make it possible to find one.’

‘Uh-hu.’

‘There a very few of them’ Waltz continued, ‘that much I know.’

Sumaey leant back against a tree, folding her arms as she regarded him.

‘Wizards...’ he mused, ‘...witches...there are certain places where they like to hang out.’

Sumaey raised an eyebrow. ‘*Hang out?*’

‘Witches and wizards are very powerful’ Waltz went on, ‘...but they were born that way, were born with all of their magic, and instinctively have the ability to use it to their fullest extent without even practicing. Unlike adventurers like myself who have to spend years learning to master the ability, and still have to rely on crystals to do so, and still only know a fraction of magic in comparison to *them*.’

‘That must suck’ Sumaey said off-handedly.

Waltz narrowed his eyes, barely hearing Sumaey’s words. ‘Witches and wizards...their magic lives within their very bodies.’

‘Cool.’

‘The only non witch or wizard who is able to use magic so freely is....’ He sighed, falling silent.

‘Who?’ Sumaey prompted, her curiosity piqued suddenly.

‘The strongest guild recognised in this kingdom’ Waltz said straightening. ‘There are just three members, all human...or at least...that’s what they were originally, I don’t think even *they* know what they have become now. They had almost god-like powers, they’re practically indestructible and invincible and immortal...all at the same time.’

Sumaey turned away. ‘Wow’ she said. ‘Impressive.’ She turned back to him. ‘So how does that help us find a wizard?’

‘The point I was eventually getting to’ Waltz said, ‘is that witches and wizards, despite being so powerful, rarely do their own work. They are smart, always planning and hatching clever little schemes. Some say they even control the king and queen of this kingdom....but that is just speculation and rumour...still.....I wouldn’t be surprised...’

‘So?’ Sumaey said moodily now, getting weary that it was taking so long to get to his point. ‘Where are you going with this?’

Waltz blinked slowly, frowning to himself.

‘Witches and wizards are very clever, but they live in the shadows.’ He paused. ‘They are hard to find.’

Sumaey was growing ever more irritated.

‘So!’

‘The best place we might find one...’

‘Yes?’

‘...is....’

‘Yes!’

Waltz fell silent.

Sumaey huffed moodily, unfolding her arms and straightening up.

‘You don’t know do you.’

It wasn’t a question.

‘I have a few ideas of where to start looking’ Waltz objected defensively.

‘So...’ Sumaey groaned.

Waltz turned, pointing in a random direction in the woods.

‘That way!’ he declared. ‘Quickly! As fast as you can!’

The next few weeks were an adventure to say the least. The pair travelled practically non-stop in that time, going from one place to another as they searched for a wizard, any wizard. For several days they hung around in a shady bar where questionable mercenaries were hired by questionable rich people for questionable work. Here Sumaey and Waltz sat in a corner watching the entire room as humans, beasts and a blend of both passed through the bar. Waltz had resorted to stealing to see them both decently fed and mostly decently sheltered in the nights and bad weathers. And so far Sumaey had not been forced to sleep in a single tree since that time Waltz left her before.....so far.

‘How will you know when you see a wizard?’ Sumaey asked Waltz at one point.

‘I will know’ Waltz answered shortly back. ‘I can sense their presence....I’ve spend so much time in the company of the witch who owns me...I can sense her kind anywhere.’

‘So you’ve meet other witches and wizards in the past?’

The edges of Waltz's eyes twitched slightly as he gazed about him. 'Oh yes' he said. 'More in my time than others have.'

They travelled from shady bar to shady bar until they had exhausted their options of shady bars. Then for some reason Waltz decided to traverse the highest mountain in the kingdom, reaching the peak in the dead of night and standing there gazing all around him in several directions, shielding his eyes from the wind and lightly falling snow as the moon shone brightly above them. A short distance away further down the slope, Sumaey watched him, hugging herself against the cold.

She had no idea what he was looking for, but whatever it was he didn't find it, and they returned back to lower ground where it was warmer.

After that they went to a library, it was the largest in the kingdom, but not situated in a town or city like one might have expected, instead it was out on the open plains beside only a few roads which were at best only fairly busy most of the time. The library was an archive of historical documents and spells and fairy tales, it was a large building built over a wide area, with several levels.

'Wizards like to read' Waltz told Sumaey unhelpfully as they sat at one of the large tables in one of the many large rooms, surrounded by huge shelves that reached all the way to the high ceilings.

'How are you supposed to reach the books on top?' Sumaey wondered aloud, ignoring Waltz. 'Oh' Waltz said. 'The most forbidden and secret and classified books are kept on top. Only people with strong magic can reach them.'

'Hu' Sumaey said, leaning forward with her chin resting on a palm. 'I'd like to see that...I wonder what's up there.'

'Don't know' Waltz said. 'I've never seen the books up there, can't even see the spines to read them.' He grinned to himself. 'One day' he promised, 'one day I will be strong enough in my magic to reach them. Then I can read them to my heart's content and learn even more.' He gazed down at the book before him, a fairy tale about a mermaid who had fallen in love with an angel.

'This is a very well known tale' Waltz said off-handedly, 'my parents used to read it to me, when I was young.'

'A baby Waltz' Sumaey spoke distractedly. 'I wonder what you were like.'

'I'm afraid not much has changed.'

Sitting atop one of the bookshelves, his head nearly brushing the ceiling, was a figure.

He smiled down at them slyly, amused by their behaviour.

'At this point do you honestly think we will find what we're looking for?' Sumaey groaned. She did not have a book in front of her like Waltz did, instead sat at the table opposite, simply watching him as he read.

'Hu?' Waltz glanced up. 'Of course we'll find what we're looking for...eventually....we just have to be patient. Trust me, it will be worth the wait. You never know' he winked up at her, 'when we meet the wizard, he might help you regain your memory.'

Sumaey stared at him. Her expression did not change, but Waltz could tell by the way she froze, that she too was anxious to find this wizard, despite acting like she didn't care. In the time they had spent together, Waltz was getting used to her quirks and was learning to read her moods.

Above them atop the bookshelf, the figure cocked his head in interest as he listened.

'Do you still not remember anything?' Waltz asked her. 'Anything at all?'

'No' Sumaey answered quietly, '...nothing.'

The figure above them smiled. 'I hear you are searching for a wizard' he declared loudly.

Waltz and Sumaey both tensed, staring up in shock at the figure above them.

'Is that a wizard?' Sumaey asked Waltz tentatively.

'No' Waltz answered quietly. 'He isn't.'

She glanced at him. 'You're sure?'

'Yes I'm sure' he snapped.

They glanced back up at him. The figure grinned widely, a mature figure still in his prime. He slid off the bookshelf, falling slowly to the floor, his long dark cloak waved gently in his magic around him as he descended. His feet touched the floor gently and he straightened, regarding the pair before him as they sat at the table, staring dumbstruck at him.

'Such magic' Waltz uttered. 'I've never seen the like...'

The man turned to him, staring at him with wise eyes.

'You' he said speaking slowly.

'Me?' Waltz repeated uncertainly.

The man narrowed his eyes, drawing in a slow breath as he fixated on Waltz.

'I smell a witch on you, but the smell is faint.'

Waltz stared back in shock as the man, using superior senses collected information about him.

'You must be a slave to her' the stranger continued. 'What an unfortunate position to be in.'

Waltz blinked in disbelief, unable to find words to speak.

'And you...' the figure went on turning to Sumaey then, 'I find you very strange indeed.'

'Strange how?' she answered flatly.

The figure grinned suddenly.

'My name is Mallard' he said, placing a hand upon his chest and bowing to them. 'I am a servant to a wizard.'

'Mallard?' Sumaey said.

'Wizard!' Waltz declared.

'Isn't a mallard a kind of duck?'

'Yes' Mallard said with a smile, turning to her. 'It was a nickname that stuck I'm afraid. My master who taught me much often said in my early days that I was as clumsy as a mallard.'

'They are rather clumsy' Sumaey grinned.

'Stop talking about ducks!' Waltz called over them. 'You said you were the servant of a wizard?' he addressed Mallard.

'Servant, apprentice, housekeeper...whatever you want to call me.'

'Can you take us to your master?' Waltz said hastily. 'Please, it's really important.'

Mallard turned to him, regarding him with a sceptical gaze.

'First' he said, 'you must prove that you are worthy to be in my master's presence.'

‘Okay’ Waltz said slowly.

‘How do we do that?’ Sumaey asked.

‘You will find out’ Mallard answered. ‘But first you have to be sure that you want to meet him. You can’t change your mind once you accept. Proving yourself to be worthy to meet my master will be a big inconvenience to you, and you couldn’t *go back* easily let’s say.’

Waltz and Sumaey exchanged a glance.

‘We accept’ Waltz said heartily as beside him Sumaey said ‘hold on shouldn’t we talk about this first?’ but his voice overrode hers.

‘Very well’ Mallard bowed. ‘Rise and I will show you the way.’

Sumaey and Waltz both did so automatically, doing so without realising it. Something suddenly compelled them to obey, some subtle spell perhaps that the man had placed on them. They turned behind them to see a great house sitting in the shadows of a mountain, all around them the wilderness grew, great knarled trees with heavy thorns, amongst which grew beautiful flowers of the kind Waltz had not seen before, and above, Waltz caught a glimpse of a wyvern flying swiftly overhead.

‘Where are we?’ Sumaey asked. ‘I thought we were in the library.’

‘You were’ Mallard replied. ‘I teleported you here with magic.’

‘I never noticed....’ Sumaey breathed.

‘That’s the point’ Mallard smiled. ‘I talked and made you talk in return to keep you distracted.’

‘That’s still incredible’ Waltz said turning to him. ‘We should have noticed something like that, shouldn’t we?’

Mallard only grinned.

‘So how do we prove ourselves?’ Sumaey asked.

Mallard raised his head to the house before them.

‘If you can reach the door’ he said, ‘then you are worthy.’

‘Oh come on’ Waltz said frowning and crossing his arms. ‘This is going to be a lot harder than it sounds I just know it.’

Beside him, Waltz could tell from her expression that Sumaey was thinking the same.

Waltz glanced around suddenly, realizing with not too much surprise, that Mallard had disappeared.

‘Should have known’ Waltz sighed. ‘Come on’ he beacons Sumaey to follow him. ‘Let’s see what surprises are in store for us.’

She nodded tentatively, before making her way slowly after him.

They moved closer to the house.

Chapter Fourteen

A Repeated Pain in the Ass (but not in *that* way)

It was only a short distance to the front door. Sumaey walked a few steps back from Waltz as he led the way.

‘I wonder what it looks like inside’ Waltz was saying. ‘I bet it’s really cool’ he gleamed.

‘Yeah’ Sumaey droned in a bored manner. ‘Really cool.’

‘I’ve never been inside a wizard’s house before.’

‘Have you not?’

‘No.’

Sumaey glanced away, before looking back at Waltz.

‘What does the witch’s house look like?’

‘Utterly ghastly.’

‘Then how do you know you will like whatever the wizard’s house will look like?’

‘Because’ Waltz said glancing back at her with a cheeky grin, ‘I *want* to see the wizard’s house, I’ve not been forced to appear there against my will, and anyway...’ he continued facing ahead again, ‘the witch always moves from one place to another. She always takes her stuff with her, but she doesn’t have a house like *this*. Every place I have seen her in so far looked like temporary accommodations, you know, abandoned places...dark places...it suits her character really.’

‘Maybe she does have a house’ Sumaey suggested, ‘but she doesn’t want you to know where it is.’

‘Now there’s a thought’ Waltz muttered. ‘It never really occurred to me before.’

‘I think you should use your brain a little more’ Sumaey politely notified him. ‘I think you might surprise yourself.’

‘Ha ha ha....’ Waltz grumbled at her, before facing ahead again.

‘What is the witch’s name that you serve?’

‘I don’t know’ Waltz shrugged.

‘Well how old is she?’

‘Her age?’ Waltz gave her a look as if she had just turned green. ‘What difference does that make? Why should I even care?’

‘The more you know about your enemy the more chance you have to hurt them’ Sumaey replied with a level frown, speaking to him as if he were a particularly stupid dog. ‘What *do* you know about her?’

Waltz turned away, brow furrowed in thought.

‘Nothing’ he told her at last, ‘nothing at all.’

‘Oh come on’ Sumaey began.

‘Nothing’ Waltz interrupted, speaking loudly. ‘Every time I meet her she has a different appearance, a young child...an old lady...eye and hair colour and height and girth are different...even skin colour...even species...she appeared as a siren once. And every time I meet her, I do so in a different location...well.....maybe meet is too much of a generous word.....more like dragged before her against my will.’

Sumaey sighed wearily, crossing her arms and shrugging her shoulders.

‘She is powerful then.’

‘To say the least’ Waltz huffed. ‘I am literally like an ant to her, and she could literally crush me in the same way if she wanted.’

‘If she’s is really that powerful, why doesn’t she do her own missions?’

‘Why would you when someone else can do your dirty work for you?’ Waltz replied.

‘Alright’ Sumaey said straightening again, ‘what’s the worse thing she’s ever made you do?’

'I'm not talking about that.'

'Oh come on...'

'I said I'm not talking about that!'

'Fine' Sumaey said, throwing her hands in the air. 'I was only trying to help.'

'How is bringing up the most traumatic experience of my life of any help?'

'Maybe you'd feel better if you talked about it?'

'Maybe you'd feel better if you filled your mouth with sand?'

'Is that sarcasm I detect in your voice?'

'No' Waltz replied flatly. 'Maybe you *should* fill your mouth full of sand.'

'Oh really' Sumaey frowned crossing her arms. 'You think I'm annoying?'

'Yes.'

'You should try living with yourself.'

'Why do you always do that?' Waltz glowered looking back at her.

'What?'

'Frown like that and cross your arms. You're even like that on the cover. You could try smiling once in a while, your face won't crack I promise.'

'Hey I've got a question. Why do you have pink hair on the cover when it's actually white-blond?'

'Beats me' Waltz shrugged.

'You look ridiculous.'

'Not as ridiculous as *you* look' Waltz countered, 'all scantily dressed like that...people might get the wrong impression about you.'

'Only if they have a dirty mind like you' Sumaey snapped. 'And anyway, people might get the wrong impression about *you*.'

'What do you mean?' Waltz asked innocently.

'With pink hair like that? People might think that you sit on the other side of the fence.'

'Oh god' Waltz said panicking now. 'Do you really think so?'

'I wonder who the others are' Sumaey wondered aloud. 'Oh well...I'm sure we'll find out soon enough.'

They walked in silence.

'Why haven't we reached the door yet?' Sumaey noted.

Waltz stopped walking suddenly, glancing up at the door.

It looked to be only a short distance away, but they hadn't gotten any closer to it.

Waltz began to walk again, then he began to walk a little faster, and then he jogged, then he ran.

He was getting no closer to the door. In fact he hadn't even left Sumaey's side, who was standing still in one spot directly behind him.

'Curious' Sumaey mused; scratching her chin as beside her Waltz began to sprint.

He tripped, then fell on his face.

'This is some powerful magic' Sumaey continued, completely ignoring Waltz as he picked himself off the floor, sweating and panting.

'Dammit' he hissed under his breath. Waltz glanced all around him. 'Hey...when did it get dark?'

Sumaey tensed slightly.

The sky above was black, and the moon shone dimly behind the clouds.

‘It’s night-time’ Sumaey breathed. ‘...When...? How....?’

‘Magic’ Waltz murmured. ‘It can get annoying sometimes.’

Sumaey sighed wearily, placing her hands upon her hips and shaking her head.

‘We should try looking for another way around’ Waltz told her. He began to walk. ‘Oh god!’

Waltz cried. ‘Help! I’m not moving!’

Sumaey groaned, grabbing him by the wrist and dragging him in the opposite direction. They walked away for a few seconds without turning, then Sumaey let go of Waltz, daring to glance back, Waltz did so too. They were indeed much further away from the house than before.

‘This...’ Waltz said crossing his arms and he considered his options, ‘...is frustrating.’

‘Come on’ Sumaey told him quietly, ‘let’s have a look around. It could be the house is just a decoy.’

Waltz nodded; unfolding his arms he followed Sumaey as she headed into the surrounding wilderness.

They gazed all about them as they went.

‘It sort of looks like a garden’ Waltz noted, seeing patches of open ground where little flowers sprung up, ‘a garden...’ Waltz continued, ‘...in a forest.’

Sumaey paused, taking in the closed world around her.

‘It’s beautiful’ she muttered, ‘but dark...’

She turned first one way, then another. ‘There’ she said pointing to a shed a short distance away. It was a small and shabby looking structure, completely unremarkable in every single way.

Waltz leant forwards to get a better look at the shed, squinting in the dark.

‘There?’ he repeated. ‘It’s just an old shed.’

‘Exactly’ Sumaey gleamed.

‘Ah’ Waltz clicked his fingers as it fell into place. ‘A delusion.’

Sumaey nodded once at him, before turning back towards the shed.

She led the way, as Waltz trailing after, lingered a few steps behind.

‘This is the sort of thing I would do if I were a wizard’ Sumaey was saying, as she reached for the door. ‘Create a fake house that looks grand, and make the real thing look shabby, so that no one would want to go there.’

‘Genius’ Waltz breathed. ‘I knew you would figure it out.’

She opened the door. Inside the shed was utterly dark. There were no walls or floor that could be seen, only blackness.

‘It’s a portal’ Sumaey realised, letting go of the door and allowing it to swing open. ‘It must lead to the actual house.’

‘Ladies first?’ Waltz suggested politely.

Sumaey sighed wearily at this, taking the first step forwards and quickly vanishing into the dark. Afraid of being left alone, Waltz hurried after her, in no time he was consumed by the magic, and then he began to fall.

He cried out in panic as he felt his stomach tighten, experiencing the sensation of falling.

He hit the ground thankfully not too hard, landing on soft grass in a bright world.

Waltz picked himself up, as Sumaey beside him did the same.

‘Uh-oh’ Waltz said as he saw the caravan before him ‘We’re not supposed to be here.’

‘What do you mean?’ Sumaey asked, brushing the grass off her clothes.

‘This must be a glitch, quick, let’s explore and make the most of it before it corrects itself!’

Waltz immediately ran forwards towards the caravan, past the confused looking man with a beard and into the caravan itself while Sumaey remained outside.

‘Hey!’ Waltz called from inside the caravan. ‘There’s a dead dog in here!’

Sumaey glanced about her, seeing three vehicles, one white, one gold and the other purple.

‘Never mind!’ Waltz called, ‘it’s just sleeping.’

Sumaey turned to Waltz as he ran back out of the caravan.

‘Hey! Look at the size of this hamster!’ Waltz said picking it up. ‘I’ve never seen one so big!’

‘I don’t think that’s a hamster’ Sumaey told him as he held the confused-looking guinea pig.

She looked up at the window of the caravan then. ‘Hey look a little white cat.’

‘I hate cats’ Waltz said, tossing the guinea pig over his shoulder and back into its enclosure.

‘Let’s look at that house!’ Waltz pointed suddenly, running over to it.

Inside they found three noisy dogs. Sumaey sneered in disgust as Waltz fussed over the two terriers.

‘I hate noisy dogs’ Sumaey muttered as the third dog; a terrified-looking spaniel cowered in the corner of the room.

‘But look how cute it is!’ Waltz said, picking up the jack rustle and waving it in her face.

‘Ug. Kill it.’

The world began to waver around them.

‘Uh-oh’ Waltz said as the world began to fade. ‘The story is correcting itself.’

They fell through the air again, this time landing in the correct place.

‘It’s fun to glimpse behind the scenes isn’t it?’ Waltz said happily, rising to his feet again.

‘Megurine Luka is a really beautiful woman.’

Sumaey stood up, dusting herself off again and completely ignoring him.

They found themselves in a strange forest, much like the one they had just left, but it was clear at a glance they were in a different place now. There was no garden around them, no shed, no house.

Waltz tilted his head back to the sky. ‘Night’ he sighed, ‘...still...’

‘Come on’ Sumaey muttered beside him, taking a step forward. ‘Let’s start looking around. The door to the wizard’s home must be here somewhere.’

Sumaey and Waltz walked slowly, doing so in silence. Several minutes later, the forest around them became sparse, until it disappeared altogether, and Waltz and Sumaey were able to see that they were in some sort of canyon.

‘Strange’ Sumaey noted, glancing first one way, and then the other at the tall rocks either side, ‘such a strange place for a forest to grow.’

Waltz remained silent, his attention flickering up to the moon shining brightly above.

The path through the canyon began to wind.

‘You know’ Sumaey began with a smile, ‘it’s actually quite beautiful here.’

Their path opened suddenly as the canyon parted before them, to reveal the most stunning view at their feet. In the distance, thousands of tiny lights shining in the dark, was a small town, all built on stilts and bridges and platforms above a shallow sea.

‘Wow’ Sumaey breathed, eyes wide at the spectacle.

Beside her Waltz folded his arms, grinning widely.

‘Now that is what I call true beauty.’

There was nothing other than the town before them, around which was a sea as still and calm as glass, the great moon reflecting on its mirror-surface, and nothing but a single narrow road leading from the town, far off into the horizon and out of sight.

‘A railway line’ Waltz noted, leaning forwards and squinting as he tried to see it clearer. ‘A train passes through here.’

‘Must be quite a ride.’

Sumaey glanced below them. Their path dipped sharply before them, before it led to the town; there was a dense patch of woodland, through which nothing could be seen.

‘I guess the path to the town leads through the woods’ Waltz noted.

Suddenly a glow began to emanate from the centre of his chest.

‘Not now’ Waltz hissed from between his teeth. ‘Sumaey!’ he said turning quickly to her, ‘meet me in the town!’

It was all he was able to say to her before he vanished.

Sumaey sighed wearily, turning away and back to the path before her.

She made her way onwards, alone this time, and ventured once more into the thick of the forest as she headed to the sparkling town upon the sea.

Sumaey walked along the lonely path for several minutes, until she heard a distant sound within the woods, breaking the complete silence.

There were muffled voices, muffled calls and the sound of weapons being drawn. Whatever was going on it sounded confrontational. There was a fight happening somewhere nearby.

Sumaey hesitated then, glancing behind her for Waltz, before she remembered that he had left her.

She faced ahead again, taking a deep breath, she put a foot forwards and made her way towards the commotions, veering off the path to do so.

It was only a short distance she walked before she found the source. In an unremarkable part of the woods within the thick foliage, was a knee-high lake, disappearing back into the darkness, it was impossible to see how big it was. Within this lake were three men, soldiers by the look of them, they were fighting against a strange creature within the lake, a creature which at first glance looked to be some sort of water elemental.

It was animal-like, but stood straight like a human, with pointed ears, shaggy hair and horns. It had three clawed fingers, and very long-thin wings at the very bottom of its back, and spikes running down its spine all the way to its long tail. It had many rings around its body in various places, and skin that was light blue.

(For a picture please refer to the cover – he’s the one with blue skin...obviously...)

Sumaey hung back for a moment, watching the scene unfold before her, she clung to the shadows.

She saw that the men were attacking the strange blue creature, which was trying desperately to defend itself. It appeared frightened, surrounded and was outnumbered; the men advanced upon it, one of them raised his sword to strike as the creature fell to his knees in defeat.

‘Stop!’ Sumaey called out suddenly.

The men turned around freezing, shocked to see her there.

‘Who are you?’ one of them demanded.

‘My name is not important’ Sumaey answered swiftly. ‘What are you doing with that beast?’

‘Who are you to make demands of us?’ another spoke.

‘And who are you to attack a beast so helpless?’ Sumaey countered.

The three men exchanged a glance.

‘He’s done a lot of damage’ the other man spoke, ‘we set out to find and kill him to put a stop to the trouble he’s been causing.’

Sumaey listened closely to these words. She looked back down to the water elemental. She didn’t know if she was mistaken, but it looked as if there were tears in his eyes, and he showed the same raw and innocent fear as a child, and Sumaey felt pity for him.

She drew a deep breath, and stepped forward.

‘He is mine’ she spoke.

‘What?’

‘I said he is mine’ Sumaey repeated. ‘My master is a great and powerful wizard, he gave me this creature as a gift, but a nasty storm scared him off and I’ve been searching for him ever since.’ She paused then. ‘He is terrified of lightning.’

The men exchanged another glance with each other, this one confused.

‘A gift?’ one of the men said sceptically.

‘Yes.’

‘What is his name?’ the other man asked suspiciously.

Sumaey glanced down at the creature who crouched low in the water, as if wanting to hide in it.

‘Spirit’ she said at last. ‘His name is Spirit, and he is mine.’

The creature gazed up at her with wide eyes, wearing a strange expression that looked suspiciously close to admiration and awe.

‘He is your pet?’ one of the men said.

‘If you want to call it that’ Sumaey said. ‘He is very dear to me. Please, don’t hurt him....’

The men hesitated.

‘Fine’ the leading man said sheathing his sword. ‘But if we see you again and you’re causing any trouble’ he said casting a dark glare down at the elemental, ‘I swear that if we catch you again we *will* kill you. Your master saved you this time...don’t ever come back.’

The elemental crouched fearfully under the man’s stare, body hunched submissively.

‘I mean what I say’ the man spoke loudly to Sumaey as the men either side of him sheathed their own weapons too. ‘If we catch him causing trouble again, there will be no second chance.’

‘I understand’ Sumaey bowed low. ‘Thank you for your kindness...it won’t happen again I promise.’

‘See that it doesn’t’ the man replied.

Sumaey turned to the elemental then.

‘Come on Spirit’ she spoke softly. ‘Come here...it’s alright...’

The elemental exchanged one last fearful glance towards the men, before slinking away from them, moving on his hands and knees in a crouched position through the water and towards her.

He reached the edge of the lake where he stopped, gazing up at as he knelt before her.

Seemingly satisfied by this gesture the men moved out of the lake, walking briskly away, their eyes lingering on the two before their silhouettes were swallowed by the darkness.

Sumaey gave a heavy sigh once they had gone, and the sounds of their footsteps had faded.

‘That was dangerous’ she said, ‘I could have been hurt or even killed by them.’

She turned back to the elemental who knelt silently before her.

‘What trouble have you been causing?’ she asked him, but he only stared up at her in wide eyed silence.

Sumaey looked back into his face. One of his eyes looked as if it were tattooed, with a heavy black outline all around it, with a sharp black line running down his cheek from his lower eye-lid, beside which were two black dots side by side.

‘You’re a strange creature’ she said to him, before turning away to abandon him there.

It was then that the creature spoke to her.

‘Love.’

She turned back.

‘What?’

‘Love’ he said again.

She gave him a peculiar expression, confused at the word he had chosen to speak to her first.

‘Go back to where you came from’ she told the elemental. ‘I have my own business.’

She took a step backwards, watching to see what he would do next, but this time he didn’t move, and he didn’t speak.

‘Don’t cause any more trouble’ Sumaey told him as she turned and walked away, ‘I won’t be there next time to save you.’

She walked away, leaving him to his fate, leaving him to fend for himself again.

Once she had gone, the elemental spoke another word, a single word.

‘Kindness...’ he said.

Sumaey left the creature alone, making her way once more towards the strange town. She found the path again and continued on her way. It was only a few minutes walk from there until she reached the entrance to the town. There was a great sign above the road, welcoming all visitors to the town, and directly beside the long path built within an arm’s reach from the water on a long wooden platform, was a railway line. It stretched out of the woods Sumaey had just come from, but leading from a different direction. From where Sumaey stood she could see a tunnel through the foot of the canyon where the tracks followed, to places unknown.

Sumaey considered it only briefly, before turning and looking ahead again.

There were a few strange characters around her, but it was mostly quiet at the entrance to the town. Within however, even from where she stood, Sumaey could see the crowds, jostling for space upon the wooden platforms, some sitting in boats upon the water for more space, some even upon the wicker rooftops of the smaller buildings.

Everyone was laughing and smiling, everyone seemed happy.

‘Welcome to the attraction!’ a young man on stilts declared to Sumaey, striding up to her.

‘Please, laugh and eat and be happy!’

He leant a little too far back, waving his arms comically like a windmill, he toppled backwards towards the ground, only to be caught by several figures who happened to be in the right place at the right time.

‘Thank you my friends!’ the strange man declared. ‘It seems I am in your debt!’

They pushed him back up, the man wobbling precariously as he was lifted into the air once more and back to his feet. Once he was standing again, the crowd cheered, waving at him, many holding tiny little flags brightly coloured high in the air.

‘Welcome!’ the stilted man said to Sumaey once more as if it was for the first time.

‘Welcome to our home!’

As she watched, a second man appeared, falling from somewhere high up and unravelling himself from a great sheet of silk.

‘We think you will like it there’ the second man told Sumaey, hanging suspended in the air as he grasped the long cloth expertly with strong hands and feet. ‘Our home is a wonderful place filled with joy and good food. Please, please experience it.’

Sumaey couldn’t help but smile at the two, even laugh a little at their antics.

‘What peculiar folk I find here’ Sumaey said, first glancing at one man, and then the other.

‘Peculiar’ said the suspended man, ‘but wonderful...’

‘And kind...’ added the stilted man, producing a bouquet of slightly squashed tulips from the inside of his red velvet jacket.

Sumaey took the flowers gratefully, her smile widening in amusement.

The stilted man bowed awkwardly to her as the suspended man gave a flourish of his hand, before swiftly climbing back up the silk. Sumaey watched him go, before turning back to the stilted man, now walking away from her in his great strides.

Sumaey grinned to herself, taking her first step forwards onto the wooden path. It was only a few steps she walked until another figure approached her, a man dressed in vibrant colours and dyed hair and a heavily painted face.

He took the flowers from Sumaey, scrunching them up in his hands and cupping them to his lips. He breathed over them, tossing them into the air quickly. The scrunched up petals of the tulips had swiftly changed into many little dragonflies made of glowing red light, they fluttered and danced away, flying low over the glassy sea, their beautiful reflections beside that of the moon upon the water. Sumaey laughed out loud at this, and the man grinning widely bowed low to her, tipping his brightly coloured hat, before moving on.

‘I think...’ Sumaey muttered quietly to herself as she breathed in the sweet and salty air around her, ‘...I am going to like it here very much.’

Far away in some unknown and unremarkable place, Waltz trudged through muck that reached up to his knees.

His mood was sour, and he grumbled to himself as he moved along.

‘...I hate everything...’

Sumaey moved into the heart of the town made of lights. Hanging within every shop, on strings over the heads of the moving crowd and on the top of every building, were little glass

jars, shining brightly of many colours. On closer inspection of one of these jars, Sumaey discovered that each jar contained a little fairy, pretty and happy little creatures they were. One of them waved to her merrily, and she smiled back.

‘Hey pretty lady!’ a voice called to her. ‘Come to my bar and let me give you a drink!’

Sumaey turned, seeing through the crowd a podgy man waving at her.

‘I haven’t any money’ she told him flatly.

‘Don’t be silly’ the man laughed at her. ‘It’s free! Everything is free here! Come and sit. What’s a pretty lady like you doing alone?’

Sumaey moved across the wooden path, weaving slowly between the bodies as she stepped closer to the man.

‘I am waiting for a friend’ she told him.

‘What better place to wait then at a bar, with a drink?!’ the man sang happily to her, pulling forth several bottles and mixing them in a large beaker.

He poured this beaker into a smaller glass. Sumaey saw there bright pink and bubbly liquid.

‘What is it?’ she asked curiously.

‘We call it Heaven’s Taste. It’s sweet yet with a sharp bite. Try it! I think you’ll find it delicious. Everyone does!’

Sumaey took the glass, bowing her head she smelt the liquid. It indeed had a sharp scent to it as the man said, yet something delicate alongside.

Sumaey brought it to her lips, taking a small sip.

‘Oh goodness’ she said, hand going to her mouth. ‘It’s delicious.’

The barman simply grinned at her, picking up one of the wet glasses he had recently washed and drying it.

‘Stay here as long as you need’ he told her, ‘and drink as much as you want.’

Sumaey leant forwards on the bar, resting on her elbows and swirling the liquid in the glass with a hand.

‘I wonder what Waltz is doing now?’ she mumbled to herself.

At that particular moment, in the area that Waltz happened to be, it conveniently started to rain.

‘Oh great’ Waltz grumbled under his breath. ‘Bloody perfect. Just what I needed about now.’

He clambered awkwardly up the rocky slope before him, the mud causing him to slip several times. It was a precarious climb, and he regretfully dared himself to glance down to the fall below him.

His stomach churned, and he began to feel a little sick.

Waltz sighed wearily, continuing his ascent to top of the rocky hill.

It was several hours later when Waltz returned to the place he had been taken from. As usual however, he was not as gracefully placed in the exact same location as he had vanished from. There were several people on the edge of the bright town looking out at the sea when they saw a figure suddenly appear in the air several feet above the water. His brief wail was cut short as he fell like a stone, landing ungracefully in the water. Picking himself up, he made his way towards the town.

Several of the people backed away as he hauled himself up onto the wooden platform. Some were a little nervous of his sudden appearance, others were downright amused.

The mud had been cleaned from him when he fell into the water, and many whisperings would circulate through the town quickly after that, all muttering about the white-blonde haired man that had fallen from the sky.

It was the rumours about Waltz's sudden appearance that reached Sumaey first, before the actual man did.

'Oh there you are' she said to him, after he had been randomly wandering the town for several hours, hoping to stumble across Sumaey eventually. 'Is it true you fell from the sky?'

Waltz took a seat sullenly next to Sumaey, leaning forwards on the bar.

'Yeah' he grumbled miserably at her. 'That witch has a sense of humour that suits her alone.'

Sumaey passed a drink to him, and Waltz took it gratefully.

He sipped the pink bubbly liquid.

'Hmmm' he said. 'This is really nice. It's delicious in fact.'

'Yeah' Sumaey beamed. 'That's what I said when I first tried it.'

He turned to her, resting his chin on his palm.

'So how do we find this door to the wizard's home' he said.

Sumaey smirked then. 'You know I completely forgot about that.'

'What even is this place?' Waltz mumbled to himself, leaning back in his chair and taking in the scenes around them, the happy people, the lights, the bright colours.

'I don't know' Sumaey replied meekly. 'But I do know this.....it is beautiful here. I almost don't want to leave.'

'Yeah' Waltz said leaning over his drink. 'I feel the same. Hopefully the witch won't summon me again in ages.' He stared down at the bubbles in the glass. 'What a pain' he grumbled. 'I wish I'd never met her.'

Chapter Fifteen The Following One

Sumaey and Waltz sat at the bar for a short time together, drinking the strange pink drink. Eventually they left, both thanking the barman who smiled kindly at them.

The pair decided to wander the town, to see what they could find.

'This is a wonderful place' Sumaey sighed contentedly as she leant forwards against the rails at the edge of the town, looking out at the glassy sea over which the town was built on. 'I've never seen waters so calm' she said.

'Yeah' Waltz smirked beside her. 'It's pretty nice isn't it?'

'Have you been here before?' she asked him.

'No' he answered. 'Have you?'

'No' she shook her head.

A moments silence passed between them.

‘I wonder what creatures live in these waters’ Sumaey said aloud. ‘Whatever they are...I bet they are beautiful.’

Waltz smiled.

‘Come on’ he said moving away, ‘there’s a bathhouse we passed by earlier. I want to go there.’

In only a short while later, Waltz and Sumaey were lounging back in a large bath set in the ground, the spar they had come to was a warm and welcoming place, the people were friendly, and the air was fresh.

Sumaey breathed a heavy sigh, leaning back with her arms resting on the edge of the bath.

A satisfying distance away on the other side, sitting as far away as possible from her, was Waltz. They shared the same bath now, the water itself was heavy with fluffy pink bubbles, and nothing below the surface could be seen, and each enjoyed their privacy.

‘This is wonderful’ Sumaey said, feeling the warm and soothing touch of the bubbly water that surrounded her. ‘Remind me to indulge myself like this more often’ she sighed, sliding deeper into the back and closing her eyes contentedly.

‘Sure thing’ Waltz waved to her from the other side of the bath. He lifted his hands before his face, staring at them. ‘My fingers are shrivelled’ he said, lowering his arms back into the water again. Waltz glanced to the side then, tensing slightly. ‘What’s that?’ he said.

‘Hm?’ Sumaey replied, without turning or even opening her eyes.

‘There’s someone out there.’

Sumaey opened her eyes, lifting her head towards Waltz and seeing him staring over her shoulder.

She turned, spying a humanoid shadow that fell across the sliding panel doors.

They both watched it for a moment, but it did not move.

Sumaey looked back at Waltz then.

‘Turn around’ she said to him, ‘and close your eyes.’

Waltz complied, staring the opposite direction with his chin resting on his folded arms. He shut his eyes tight, listening as Sumaey moved in the water behind him.

She rose to her feet, climbing out of the bath and grabbing a nearby towel. Wrapping it around herself, she made her way to the door, sliding it open to see what was outside.

The bathhouse was at the very edge of the town, the view from the room they bathed in was that of the ocean, only a step below them.

Sumaey froze at the sight of the figure she saw there. The moon was behind, casting his silhouette forwards upon their door. She saw a familiar figure, with blue skin, horns, shaggy hair and gold rings around his body. It was the same figure she had seen not long before, the one she had saved from the men that threatened to harm him.

‘What are you doing here?’ she asked the water elemental.

The elemental raised his head slightly, gazing with wide eyes into her face.

Sumaey frowned down at him.

‘What do you want?’ she asked.

The elemental opened his mouth and spoke.

‘I want you.’

Sumaey froze, staring back at him in shock.

‘Sumaey?’ Came Waltz’s voice. ‘What’s out there?’

The elemental looked down suddenly as Waltz appeared in view just behind Sumaey. Waltz stared at the newcomer in confusion, as the newcomer stared back.

And then the elemental's face contorted in rage at the sight of him, and Waltz baulked.

'Uh-oh.'

The elemental let out a cry of fury, tearing forwards towards the bathhouse, towards Waltz, great jets of water formed either side of him as he moved at impossible speed.

But Waltz was long out of the bath, running across the room stark-naked as he made his escape.

'Waltz wait!' Sumaey cried hopelessly after him as he fled. 'Leave him alone!' she barked at the elemental as it crashed through the door and past her, making its way after Waltz, seemingly hungry for his blood.

But the creature completely ignored her, instead continued his desperate pursuit of Waltz, intent on doing to him what could only be deemed as unpleasant, all the while, Waltz ran as fast as he could away, streaking through the bathhouse butt-naked.

'Waltz!' Sumaey called after him.

She cursed under her breath, using her magic to summon her clothes to her, they melted onto her body like water, forming themselves perfectly to her shape.

She dropped the towel, making her way after Waltz, following the path of destruction the water elemental had left behind, and apologising to several figures along the way.

Waltz ran upstairs, then downstairs, then around the entrance hall several times, all the while with the beast tearing after him, snarling and crying out in rage. But Waltz was not tiring.

'Waltz will you stop running around?!' Sumaey screamed at him, huffing and puffing as she slowed to a stop, holding the stitch in her side.

'Are you kidding?!' Waltz's voice trailed through the air as he darted (still completely in the nude) down the corridor and into the sauna.

Sumaey watched him go, hearing several voices of shock and dismay coming from inside the sauna, then the sound of several things being broken, then the cry of a man slipping and falling over, and then Waltz appeared again (still naked) with the blue-skinned creature still following closely after him. Neither showed any signs of slowing or giving up the chase any time soon.

Sumaey gave a heavy groan, sighing into her hand and closing her eyes as a group of young girls screamed in horror nearby. She wished it would all go away.

'Why do I have to share the company of such an idiot?' she lamented.

And then she tensed suddenly, hearing a strange noise.

Sumaey looked up, seeing the most peculiar thing indeed. A mighty arm suddenly appeared, reaching through a glowing portal that hovered in the air high above them.

Sumaey stared upwards with the confused expression one might expect of seeing such a thing.

She spoke very slowly.

'What the actually f***?'

Waltz ran passed her again, seemingly oblivious to the arm's presence, until it reached out to grab him.

'WAAAHHHHHH!'

The arm held Waltz firmly by the wrist, hauling up into the air and receding into the portal, but not before the creature was able to grab him, jumping up and catching Waltz's dangling leg before it was lifted out of his reach. Thinking quickly Sumaey bolted forwards, grabbing the elemental's long tail and being lifted up into the air with the other two.

The three of them were pulled into the portal above them by the giant arm, and everything around them changed.

The next thing each of them knew, was that they were in a small room. For about half a second they were each able to admire the painted ceiling beside them, right before they landed unceremoniously on the hard wooden floor below.

'Ow' Waltz whimpered pathetically, arm waving about as he struggled to right himself.

'Ew!' Sumaey sneered as his hand landed on her arm. 'Don't touch me! You're still naked!'

Waltz glanced down at himself; suddenly realising she was perfectly correct about this fact. And then he tensed, suddenly noticing the elemental sitting right beside him.

'Uh-oh.'

The elemental was coming back to himself, having been disorientated by his unexpected excursion; he was slowly coming to terms with where he was. He glanced up at Waltz, who was right next to him, and his lip curled in a snarl, his eyes narrowing and his claws rose as he was about to attack.

But then a sudden light hit the elemental, and his body relaxed. He sat back, lowering his arms and bowed his head.

Waltz stared at the creature for a moment in shock, wondering what had happened, until he saw a figure standing at the edge of the room.

'Who are you?'

The figure, a young man who looked wise beyond his years, stepped forward.

'I had to pull you out of there' he said, 'it was getting embarrassing to watch.'

'What?'

The figure opened another portal beside him with ease, reaching into it. When he pulled his hand back out, he held in his grasp Waltz's clothes, his sword, and what few other possessions he had.

'There' the stranger said tossing them to his feet. 'Get dressed.'

He turned his back swiftly as Waltz rose, getting dressed back into his old clothes as Sumaey, like the stranger, turned her back to him hastily, staring intently at the wall. The elemental did not look away however. The elemental could not take his eyes away from Waltz's face. He seemed calm, but if you were to look closely at him, you would clearly see anger in his eyes, hate even, loathing.

Waltz patted himself down, sighing contentedly once fully dressed again. He noticed the creature's gaze.

'It's rude to stare.'

The elemental did not look away.

'So who are you then?' Sumaey voice, daring to glance around and relaxing once she saw out of the corner of her eye that Waltz, once again, wore clothes.

'I am the man who resides in this home' the stranger replied. 'This is the home of the wizard.'

'We got here?' Waltz cried triumphantly. 'We found the door, and you're the wizard!'

‘No’ the man answered shortly. ‘You did not find the door, and I am not the wizard.’

‘But you said...’

‘Yes?’ The man replied. ‘I said what?’

‘I am the man who resides in this home and this is the home of the wizard’ Waltz recited the strangers words. ‘You do not own this home’ he clarified, ‘and you are not the wizard.’

The stranger smiled. ‘Correct.’

‘What should we call you?’ Sumaey asked, folding her arms.

‘Bob.’

‘Bob?’ Waltz raised an eyebrow. ‘Is that really your name?’

‘No’ the man who was not called Bob replied. ‘You do not need to know my real name for reasons you do not need to know. Mysterious magical stuff...so on and so forth.’

‘So’ Sumaey said to him, ‘...Bob...why are we here? You brought us here didn’t you? But for what purpose?’

‘The place you just visited was supposed to test you’ Bob replied. ‘Only those worthy would find the door to the wizard’s home and be allowed to enter. Those worthy would pass hidden challenges to reveal whether or that person was good, kind, and pure of heart so on and so forth. Sumaey passed her test when she chose to stand up for the creature’ he indicated the elemental before them. ‘She chose to put herself in harm’s way by standing up to those men to protect another who was in need. She showed her caring nature. But you both needed to pass to be able to enter through the hidden door’ Bob continued, turning to Waltz then. ‘I had not managed to organise a test for you’ he said to Waltz, ‘you were mysteriously called away and mysteriously returned. You messed up the plans that I *did* have for you, and then this creature attacked you, so I decided to bring you here.’

‘But why?’ Waltz asked. ‘If I didn’t pass your *good person* test, why did you trust me to bring me here?’

Bob sighed, showing his palms. ‘Boredom I suppose’ he admitted. ‘I don’t get many visitors, and I thought you might amuse me...but mostly I was getting tired of watching you’ he glowered at Waltz. ‘The young ladies of the bathhouse didn’t like the way you acted.’

‘Me?’ Waltz squawked defensively. ‘I wasn’t the one who attacked an unarmed person.’ He looked down at the water elemental, glaring at him and feeling a sudden injustice had been done upon him. ‘Why *did* you attack me?’

‘He was jealous’ Bob replied.

‘Jealous?’ Waltz echoed.

‘He’s formed strong emotions for Sumaey’ Bob explained. ‘Not something I intended to happen, but one could reasonably argue that he loves her, because of the kindness she had shown him.’

Sumaey raised an eyebrow at this, glancing down at the elemental, who had bowed his head, turning away from Waltz, before looking up again and meeting her eye.

‘You gave me a name’ he whispered to her. ‘I have never had a name before.’

‘Spirit’ Sumaey breathed. ‘That is your name now?’

He bowed to her, still knelt before her; he had not risen when he had fallen through the portal.

‘Kindness’ he spoke to her. ‘I love you.’

She stared down at him in shock.

‘Love is a gradual process that happens over time’ she said. ‘You cannot love me.’

‘In any case’ Waltz spoke up, addressed the man who was not called Bob. ‘You said you were not the wizard. If you are not him, then where is he?’

Bob tilted his head, regarding Waltz closely.

‘He is far away.’

‘Why the unhelpful and cryptic answers?’ Waltz scowled. ‘You could just as easily have said *I don’t know*.’

Not Bob smirked in amusement.

‘Fine’ he relented. ‘I don’t know where he is.’

‘So who *are* you then?’ Sumaey asked him.

‘I am his apprentice’ Bob turned to her. ‘I am to remain here and look after his home while my master is gone. What he is doing is very important, perhaps even dangerous. I will learn all of this when he returns, *if* he returns. What he is doing is very important, perhaps even dangerous’ he repeated again. ‘I have been waiting for his return for a long time, and will wait for a lot longer still.’

Waltz stared at Bob grimly, arms folded. ‘You seem to know a lot about us’ he said to him. ‘Why is that?’

‘You’ve peaked my interest’ Bob admitted. ‘There is much for me to do here, in my master’s home’ he said, ‘but from time to time, I have some moments to myself.’ He paused, turning to a wide and shallow silver bowl that sat upon the table nearby.

Bob approached it.

‘I see many things’ Bob told the others vaguely, ‘many interesting things.’

Unable to hold back his curiosity, Waltz shuffled forwards, standing beside Bob and gazing down into the bowl.

‘I don’t see anything’ he said.

‘I know’ Bob smiled to himself. ‘I didn’t either...in the beginning.’

Waltz sighed disappointedly to himself, turning away.

‘So I guess you used these means to spy on us.’

‘Not spy’ Bob spoke carefully. ‘The pool shows anything that may even be of slight consequence to my master...or even myself. At first, you meant nothing to me, and then I realised you were looking for my master.’ He paused again. ‘My master won’t be back for a while’ he said, ‘I’m not really allowed to bring anyone here’ he said, ‘especially those who do not pass *the test*.’

‘So why did you bring us here?’ Sumaey asked him. ‘I imagine you want something from us, perhaps in return for what we want...to meet your master?’

Bob smiled apologetically.

‘I’m sorry’ he said. ‘I cannot allow you to meet my master, because I don’t know where he is or when he will be back. And apart from which...’ he shrugged his shoulders, ‘...I don’t know if he would even want to meet you.’

A silence passed.

‘He thinks highly of himself then’ Waltz spoke up.

‘I’m sorry’ Bob said again, speaking to Waltz now. ‘Wizards are very proud people.’

‘So why did you bring us here then?’ Waltz huffed, scratching his chin tiredly.

Bob bit his lip, dipping his head slightly, before lifting it again to speak.

‘I have nothing to offer you in return’ he admitted, ‘but if you do this for me, I will put in a good word for you to my master.’

‘Cut to the chase’ Waltz said impatiently.

Bob frowned at this.

‘My brother has gone missing’ he said after a time. ‘I want you to find him.’

Sumaey and Waltz were both silent, sharing a glance with one another. Clearly each expected more explanation.

‘Why don’t you find him yourself?’ Sumaey asked casually, as the newly named Spirit remained sitting on the ground before her, running his fingers through his thick hair distractedly.

‘I cannot’ Bob told them. ‘I am unable to leave this place.’

‘Why?’ Sumaey narrowed her eyes.

‘There are many peculiarities within this house’ Bob said tilting his head back. ‘I cannot leave, there is too much for me to do here.’

‘Then how do you know he’s missing?’ Waltz asked.

‘I write to him often’ Bob said to Waltz. ‘He has not replied for a long time.’

‘So?’ Waltz shrugged. ‘Maybe he’s busy.’

‘It’s been years’ Bob moaned, unable to keep the grief from his voice. ‘I am deeply worried for his safety, but I cannot leave this place.’ He bit his lip hard to force himself to maintain control. ‘We used to write to each other all the time...but not now...’

‘Your master has been gone for a long time then?’ Sumaey spoke flatly.

‘Yes’ Bob mumbled.

‘So where was your brother last?’ Waltz asked.

‘Like myself’ Bob explained, ‘he serves a strong master, not a wizard however, he is not quiet that powerful. The man is a sorcerer, my brother is a lesser sorcerer, an apprentice like myself.’

‘I see.’

‘I have not heard from him for a very long time’ Bob said. ‘My brother is very dear to me, and I am greatly concerned for him. I ask this only as a favour, though I have little to offer in return. I know you are adventurers, and that you want to form a guild of your own’ he said to Waltz. ‘Perhaps this is a good place to start.’

‘I don’t know’ Waltz frowned a little unconvinced. ‘It sounds like a lot of hassle.’

‘I’ll give you a horse’ Bob offered.

Waltz froze.

‘Alright’ he relented. ‘Where do we begin?’

Bob smiled.

‘There is a house far from here, built upon a cliff edge and overlooking the sea. You will recognise it immediately by the blue tower build against one corner. It is a beautiful house.’ He paused. ‘I want you to go to this place and ask the sorcerer that resides there about my brother.’

Waltz waited, expecting further explanation.

‘Is that it?’

‘That’s it’ Bob nodded.

‘Sounds like there’s going to be a catch’ Waltz mused.

‘There is no catch’ Bob reasoned.

‘There must be a catch.’

‘No catch’ Bob repeated.

‘Are you sure?’

Bob’s expression was flat. ‘...Yes...’ he said. ‘There is no catch...at least not from my end...’

‘I don’t know’ Waltz frowned doubtfully, tilting his head at the man. ‘Sounds like there’s going to be a catch.’

‘You get a horse’ Bob reminded.

‘Oh’ Waltz said having seemingly forgotten about this. ‘Ok. We’ll do it.’

Beside him, Sumaey gave a weary sigh, pinching the bridge of her nose in frustration.

‘What are we waiting for then?’ she demanded. ‘Let’s go!’

In no time at all, Waltz and Sumaey were waiting outside the wizard’s house, while not Bob went around the back to fetch the horse he had promised them.

When he brought it around, Waltz squealed like a school girl, jumping up and down and clapping his hands excitedly, while Sumaey beside him stood motionless, wearing an expression of exaggerated boredom, as if she were simply waiting for a train to arrive.

Bob slowed to a stop, the horse he led beside him followed suit. It was a beautiful animal, the sort of horse Waltz had only seen owned by the more successful guilds, or those who were far wealthier than he. It was lean but muscular, its body perfectly proportioned, with long legs and a strong head. The stallion was bronze in colour, with a dark mane and tail that was perfect and glossy, just like the rest of its coat.

‘Awww waw!’ Waltz declared at the sight of it, as beside him Sumaey’s interest was suddenly caught by a passing butterfly. ‘It’s beautiful!’

Bob nodded approvingly.

‘It’s yours’ he said, handing the reins over to him. ‘But remember’ Bob went on, as Waltz moved eagerly towards the animal, ‘if you do not keep your end of the deal, trust me you will regret it.’

‘I know I know’ Waltz said hastily, running his hand down the horse’s neck. ‘You are watching us in your special silver bowl.’

Bob nodded again. ‘It will be a long while before my master comes back I think, and I cannot leave until then. But remember, if you betray me, I will find you...eventually, and quite easily too.’

‘Yes I know’ Waltz said again, ‘there’s no need to threaten us.’

‘It’s not a threat’ Bob smile, giving Waltz another nod, ‘just a friendly reminder.’

‘Indeed.’

Bob raised his head. ‘I’ve packed some food and clothes for you both’ he indicated the bags the horse carried now. ‘Go and find my brother, and bring me good news.’

‘We’ll do what we can’ Waltz replied.

Bob took a step away, turning he strode back into the house without another word or a backwards glance, snapping the door shut behind him.

‘Well’ Sumaey sighed once he had gone. ‘I guess we’re on our own now.’

Waltz didn't hesitate to clamber on the unfamiliar horse, doing so as quickly as he could. The stallion stood very still as he patiently waited for his rider to stop flailing his limbs around.

'My lady?' Waltz offered, reaching a hand out to Sumaey.

She smacked it aside irritated, leaping onto the horse behind him in one smooth action. She clearly didn't need or want his help.

'Now go' she told him. 'Bob told you were this blue tower is yes?'

'Yes' Waltz nodded eagerly. 'It's that way!' he pointed.

Sumaey grasped him suddenly, arms around his middle as he kicked the stallion hard, sending it into a gallop. He whooped and hollered in delight, the strong wind stinging his eyes and whipping his hair back.

Even Sumaey who held him tightly from behind couldn't suppress a smile from her lips.

It was a wonderful feeling to ride fast across the lands on a beast so fine.

For hours they ran through the wilderness, weaving through the trees and wading through the tall grasses, splashing through the rivers and streams and running far, the horse never tiring.

(It was obviously a magic horse)

When at last they stopped, they had travelled a great distance from the wizard's house, and were in a new place entirely.

'This is the greatest gift I've ever been given' Waltz declared proudly, admiring the beast as it lowered its head to graze, its glossy dark tail flicking back and forth.

'It is great' Sumaey agreed, 'I won't deny that.'

'And it ours' Waltz nodded with satisfaction. 'All ours.'

'We should get some rest' Sumaey told him, moving to lie down on the forest floor and grabbing a blanket from the saddle bag as she went, pulling it over her. 'If we keep going at the pace we are, we should get there by tomorrow afternoon.'

'Great' Waltz sighed happily, patting the horse affectionately, just one last time before he went to sleep. 'I'll see you in the morning' he whispered to the beast kindly, before moving away and lying down near Sumaey.

She tilted her head back up at him.

'What are you going to call him?' she asked.

Waltz pondered for a few moments.

'Squishy.'

'Squishy?' Sumaey repeated sceptically.

'Yeah' Waltz sighed with content, closing his eyes. 'It's perfect.'

'Hm.'

Sumaey turned away, lying on her side with her back to him.

Waltz glanced at the newly dubbed Squishy, one last time, before allowing himself to drift off to sleep.

That night, he had a wonderful dream. In his dream he was riding Squishy across a wide beach, running in slow motion through the waves, with the wind blowing back his hair, the stallion's mane tossing back, all in slow motion. Waltz felt wonderful.

When he woke, he knew instantly that it was morning; he could tell from the pale sky above that it was still early, and the slight chill that hung in the air. He blinked the tiredness from his eyes several times, turning his head to the side to face Squishy.

He froze in horror when he saw that he was gone.

Waltz sat bolt upright, crying out in dismay. Beside him Sumaey woke with a start, gasping in fright as Waltz leapt to his feet.

‘What the hell?!’ she snarled, angry at being so abruptly woken. ‘Waltz...what's wrong with....?’

‘It’s Squishy! He’s gone!’

Sumaey glanced around, seeing that indeed the newly named Squishy, was in fact gone.

‘Oh’ she groaned.

‘How could this happen? I tied him up properly...how...?’ and then he turned, crying out in alarm at the figure that stood nearby.

His scream trailed off into a quiet groan, until he stopped making noise altogether.

‘It’s you!’ he said, glaring angrily at the figure.

‘My name is Spirit’ the water elemental replied coolly.

‘What are *you* doing here?’ Waltz demanded angrily. ‘Where is my horse?’

Spirit stared at him for several seconds before answering. ‘He ran away when he saw me.’

‘What?’

‘He was afraid of me’ Spirit explained. ‘He pulled on his rope so tightly that it broke loose, and he ran away.’

‘What?’ Waltz squawked again.

‘Are you deaf or stupid?’ Spirit asked flatly.

Waltz stuttered, fumbling on his words in shock.

‘Where is my horse?’ he said again.

Spirit didn’t answer, instead continued to stare flatly at him.

‘Ran away?’ Waltz uttered. ‘How long ago was this?’

Spirit bowed his head slightly, deep in thought. ‘Several hours.’

‘What?’ Waltz squawked for the third time.

‘You’ve been watching us this entire time?’ Sumaey asked him curiously, rising to her feet.

‘Why are you here?’

Spirit turned to her, his expression softening. But he said nothing.

‘I’m going to look for Squishy’ Waltz said, voice wavering as he worried.

He rushed off into the wilderness, quickly vanishing from sight. Sumaey turned to Spirit, giving him a flat expression. He stared back, revealing nothing in his emotions, but Sumaey could see that his body was relaxed and that he was calm.

‘You followed us this whole way?’ she asked him. ‘I thought you belonged to that man who looks after the wizard’s house.’

‘No’ Spirit replied. ‘I am free.’

‘Are you still angry?’

Spirit paused. ‘The man calmed me.’

‘Why did you follow us?’

‘I wanted to be with you’ he answered.

‘You still say you love me?’ Sumaey droned.

‘Yes’ Spirit breathed, ‘...I do...’

Sumaey sat down again and hugged her knees, leaning forwards and regarding him as her brown hair fell forwards over her shoulders.

‘What do you know about love?’ she asked him.

‘My mother...’ Spirit answered solemnly, ‘...loved me very much.’

Waltz spent that entire day searching for his beloved horse, but it could not be found. He walked far and wide, calling out the stallion’s name. But as darkness began to fall once again, he realised his hope was lost, and he returned to the place Sumaey waited for him, the place they had slept the previous night, feeling thoroughly miserably.

When he reached the place, he was shocked to see the blue-skinned elemental still standing there.

‘What are *you* still doing here?’ Waltz demanded.

The creature did not answer. Waltz began to grow angry.

‘Why are you following us?’ Waltz snarled, ‘why don’t you just go away?’

‘I cannot’ Spirit mumbled sombrely. ‘I have nothing to go to.’

Waltz hesitated.

‘Why don’t you go back to where you came from?’

‘I was unwelcome there’ Spirit answered. ‘People tried to kill me.’

Waltz paused.

‘What about your family?’

Spirit paused.

‘My mother is the only family I have ever known.’

‘Then why don’t you go find her?’ Waltz asked.

‘I cannot’ Spirit murmured.

‘Why not?’

Spirit narrowed his eyes. ‘Because’ he answered coldly, ‘she was killed...by hunters like you....’

Waltz stared back unblinking, feeling an uncomfortable sensation in the pit of his stomach.

‘Is that why you tried to attack me earlier?’ he asked. ‘Because you knew I was a hunter?’

‘No.’

‘Then why?’

Spirit glanced back to Sumaey, who leant against a nearby tree with her arms folded, watching the two silently.

‘I was jealous’ Spirit answered at last. ‘She is so kind, and was kind to me....’ he paused.

‘You do not deserve her...’ he said at last. ‘You do not deserve her. You are selfish.’

‘What do you know about me?’ Waltz challenged.

‘I know your kind’ Spirit glowered, ‘I’ve seen it many times before. You kill because you find it exciting, and now...you have dragged *her* into your barbaric lifestyle.’

Waltz gritted his teeth angrily. ‘Why don’t you...’ he began slowly, ‘just go away and leave us alone?’

‘I am not going anywhere’ Spirit answered flatly. ‘Sumaey has been kind to me...and I have nothing else left for me in this world...because of people like you’ he hissed. ‘Where she goes...’ he said, ‘...I go.’

Waltz narrowed his eyes.

‘Well’ Sumaey voiced at last, pushing herself off the tree and straightening up as she unfolded her arms, ‘this *is* a predicament. Hey Waltz, didn’t you want to form your own guild?’

‘No!’ he said loudly.

‘Don’t be stupid’ she glowered. ‘You wanted to form your own guild; I refuse to believe you’ve so swiftly changed your mind. If Spirit won’t go away, then we should accept him into our guild. After all...he has nowhere else to go. Like myself...like you...’

Waltz grimaced, unconvinced.

‘Yeah but...he tried to attack me.’

Sumaey considered this, deciding that Waltz in fact had a good point.

‘Spirit’ she said to him. ‘You will be accepted into our small guild, and allowed to travel with us...on the condition that you do not harm Waltz.’

‘No’ he said.

‘No?’

‘He is my enemy’ Spirit replied.

‘Alright’ Sumaey spoke slowly, ‘how about this? If you promise not to harm Waltz, and actually abide by this promise, then you will be in my favour.’

Spirit blinked slowly.

‘Fine’ he said at last. He glanced towards Waltz, then looked quickly away from him again, as if the sight of him made him angry. ‘I will not hurt Waltz, as long as I am given a place to stay.’

‘You can stay here’ Sumaey told him, much to Waltz’s dismay. ‘As long as you are kind to both of us, you will be welcomed by both of us. *Won’t he Waltz?*’ she added harshly.

Waltz’s protests were cut short by her glare, and he stared at Sumaey in annoyance.

‘Fine’ Waltz submitted at last. ‘Of course he is welcome’ he spoke through gritted teeth.

Sumaey smiled.

‘We are not doing too badly then’ she said giving him a wink and placing her hands upon her hips. ‘Our guild has grown to three members now.’

Chapter Sixteen

Stubbornness Is an Annoying Personality Trait, So Is Not Listening

The now three members of the guild continued the rest of the way to the blue tower by foot, Waltz moodily cursing along the way and muttering bitterly to himself under his breath.

‘Oh come on’ Sumaey voiced at last when she was tired of his complaints. ‘It’s not all bad.’

Just as she said this, her stomach growled. The horse (newly named Squishy) had been carrying all of their food.

‘I guess we should have unloaded the horse overnight’ Sumaey mused aloud.

Waltz turned around to glance at her, giving her an expression as if she had just vomited a slug.

He then spotted Spirit who walked one step behind Sumaey. Spirit was glaring at Waltz silently.

Waltz swallowed nervously, turning to face ahead again. Spirit didn’t talk that much, which Waltz liked. What Waltz didn’t like was his piercing stare. Spirit had it in for him; he knew this, as if it wasn’t blatantly obvious anyway. He suppressed a shudder as he stormed ahead.

Maybe he will slit my throat in my sleep Waltz thought darkly, or put fire-ant venom in my food...or a scorpion in my boot...

He glanced back again briefly. Sumaey was giving him a strange expression now; it was as if she knew what he was thinking.

Waltz gritted his teeth, staring intently ahead of him again.

Their journey was long and uneventful. It was long and boring and silent and long and silent and far longer than it should have been or would have been...had that stupid water elemental not scared away Waltz’s precious stallion.

‘My poor Squishy’ Waltz lamented. ‘Where are you now? Lost in the wilderness, frightened and alone. What will become of you?!’

‘Your horse will be fine’ Sumaey huffed behind him as they walked. ‘Stop being silly.’

‘But what if he gets lonely?’ Waltz worried. ‘What if some creature attacks him...or it gets cold...or there is a lightning storm....what if he is found by a herd of other horses and they pick on him.’

‘Oh give me strength’ Sumaey rolled her eyes irritably. ‘You do realise that there are tons of wild horses roaming these lands, and they are all doing absolutely fine without *you*. And besides’ Sumaey added with a flick of her hair, ‘he’s a stallion. He would be pleased to find a herd of other horses I’m sure. He would be more than a match for any other stallion.’

‘Do you think so?’ Waltz whimpered, his lower lip trembling.

‘Yes Waltz’ Sumaey told him shortly. ‘I do. Now stop worrying.’

Waltz bit his lip, falling silent.

Far away in the wilderness somewhere, was a bronze stallion with a dark mane and tail, still wearing some of his saddle bags. He flicked his tail contentedly, happily munching at the tall grass around him.

‘Alright’ Waltz said a long time later, slowing to a stop. ‘We’re here.’

Sumaey stood beside him, placing her hands on her hips and staring forwards, as on her other side Spirit stood. He cast Waltz a dark glare, before looking with the others forwards towards the manor built upon the cliff edge.

‘There’s the blue tower’ Sumaey sighed wearily. ‘We made it.’

The manor was a grand place, large and imposing, built of grey stone and all a single colour, save for the tower, which stood out brightly against the rest of the building. The windows were tall, and from several of the chimneys that could be seen, smoke churned from within.

‘It looks warm’ Sumaey noted. ‘I bet its really nice inside.’

‘I bet’ Waltz echoed.

They made their way forwards, eventually reaching a cobbled stone road that grew out from the front gates of the manor (the gates were also tall and imposing). But the road went nowhere; instead it faded away into the ground, consumed by the grass around it.

‘I wonder what the master is like’ Sumaey thought aloud. ‘I wonder what sort of character he is.’

Waltz paused as they made their way forwards, glancing off to the side and seeing a great forest nearby.

‘I wonder what lives in there’ he said, staring at the wild and knarled trees. ‘All manner of creatures I bet.’

He turned away, walking ahead again towards the closed gates. They opened just as they reached them.

‘We spotted you from afar’ said a tall and slender young man appearing through the gates.

‘We don’t often get visitors. What is your purpose here?’

‘We wish to see your master’ Waltz droned tiredly. ‘Who are you?’

‘I am no one’ the slender man replied, ‘just one of many servants here.’ He paused, considering the other figures that accompanied Waltz. ‘Come in’ he said at last, stepping back so that they could enter.

Waltz did so cautiously.

Inside they found a sizable courtyard made of more grey stone. Standing around in the doorways, stairs and overlooking them from balconies were more young men and women, all dressed modestly, all dressed in black like the man that had opened the door for them.

‘More servants?’ Waltz asked a little nervously.

The man that had opened the door to them smiled.

‘Yes’ he said. ‘This is all of us. We don’t often get visitors, the others are curious as to who you three are.’

Waltz gazed all around him, feeling a little overwhelmed at being the centre of such attention, every single one of the looming figures stared at him, never breaking their gaze. Sumaey and Spirit seemed unfazed by this; it was as if they didn’t even notice.

‘Nice place you got here’ Waltz commented, noting the battlements around them. ‘Are you expecting a siege?’

‘You never know what to expect’ the tall servant smiled. ‘That’s why it always pays to be prepared.’

‘I see.’

‘Follow me this way’ the servant told them.

They entered the main building through one of the small doors, they had to duck their heads to pass through, this was a little more awkward for Spirit, who was an entire head taller than the others. He folded his small wings to him as they went, tail whipping back and forth as they stepped through the door.

Inside the rooms were as grand and impressive a sight as the building had been from the outside. Lush purple carpets were at their feet, mighty tapestries showing all manner of wonderful stories, some of which Waltz was familiar with, others he was not. There were several massive fireplaces that they saw as they moved through the building, hanging balconies, great circular windows built horizontal to the ground above their heads, allowing the light to stream in, chandeliers made of swords that looked as if they had blackened in a fire.

‘I’ve never seen a place quite like this’ Waltz said.

‘Interesting isn’t it’ the servant that led them smiled with amusement back at them. ‘This is what you see just at a glance, when you look closer...’ he trailed off. ‘It’s interesting working here’ he finished, ‘you learn a thing or two.’

‘I bet...’

They continued to walk in silence for a few moments.

‘Here we are’ the servant said slowing to a stop. ‘He’s been waiting for you.’

‘That’s clique’ Waltz scoffed. ‘You may have well have said...*he’s been expecting you*...if we walk in there now will he be stroking a cat on his lap?’

‘Uh.....’ the servant frowned, ‘...no. We saw you coming from a way away. The servants gathered in the courtyard to wait for your arrival, our master is waiting for you too.’

‘Oh.’

The servant indicated the door.

‘Go on’ he said.

Waltz turned to the door, taking a deep breath.

He reached out a hand, grasping the worn gold doorknob and turning.

He stepped into the room, Sumaey and Spirit following after him. Inside the master was indeed waiting for them, sitting in a chair facing them with a smile upon his face.

‘You’re a funny man you know that?’ the sorceress said to Waltz.

Waltz blinked curiously at this.

‘Funny?’ he said. ‘Am I?’

The sorceress leaned around, towards his desk and hastily put away some papers before turning back to the three and rising to his feet.

‘What can I do for you?’ he asked them. ‘Why are you here?’

Waltz took a deep breath.

‘We have been sent here to check on the wellbeing of your apprentice’ Waltz began. ‘His brother is very worried about him. Apparently he has not heard from his brother for a long time.’

The sorcerers’ expression immediately darkened.

‘Graham’ he said. ‘That fool.’

‘Who?’

The sorcerer furrowed his brow, glaring down at Waltz. ‘The missing brother you seek. His name is Graham.’

‘Well...where is he?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Hmm’ Waltz frowned. ‘Why? Isn’t he supposed to be your apprentice?’

The sorcerer turned away, picking up a pair of binoculars and moving over to the window. He lifted them to his face, staring through and at the large forest before his manor.

‘I haven’t seen him in a long while’ the sorcerer said after a few seconds of staring through the binoculars. He put them down. ‘Graham is in the woods somewhere. He has been there for quite some time.’

‘In the woods?’ Waltz repeated, while behind him Sumaey and Spirit both turned to glance out of the window. ‘I don’t understand.’

It was then he saw something in the room shift. Waltz’s attention flickered down to the sorcerer’s chair. Here he saw a dog lying behind the chair, on a fluffy rug set against the desk.

Waltz’s attention slid back to the sorcerer, who had noticed his gaze.

‘This is my dog Walter. He is an old boy now, I keep him up here because he doesn’t get along with the others.’

‘Interesting looking dog’ Waltz noted, seeing as it slept its slender build and scruffy coat. ‘What is it?’

The sorcerer turned back to the window, staring out at the woods. ‘It’s a deerhound.’

‘Why do you keep looking at the forest?’ Sumaey questioned. ‘Where is Graham?’

‘He is in there...’ the sorcerer replied, ‘...somewhere.’

‘Yeah you said’ Sumaey scowled impatiently as Spirit beside her began to scratch at his ear. ‘But why?’

The sorcerer grimaced. ‘His brother isn’t going to be very happy with me’ he mumbled to himself. ‘I wonder if he will seek revenge against me.’

‘What have you done?’ Sumaey asked suspiciously.

‘Graham was a tiresome apprentice’ the sorcerer mumbled. ‘He was disobedient and troublesome and mouthy and complained too much and always got into trouble and never listened...I gave him one last warning...which he ignored. And you have to stand by your threats or else your words mean nothing.’

‘Will you get to the point already?’ Sumaey snapped. ‘Where is Graham and what have you done to him?’

The sorcerer regarded Sumaey.

‘I punished him’ he said, ‘and I have not seen him since.’

‘Answer the dam question!’

The sorcerer sighed tiredly.

‘Before I answer I just want you to know that I gave him several warning and I gave him several chances. I warned him and told him clearly when it was his last chance, but he did not listen.’ The man fell silent; watching Waltz and Sumaey, Spirit was staring at something hidden in the corner of the room, ignoring everything else. The sorcerer spoke at last.

‘I turned him into a deer’ he answered, ‘and set my deerhounds on him.’

‘WHAT?!’ Sumaey and Waltz both exclaimed.

Spirit glanced forwards again.

‘It’s alright’ the sorcerer hastened, ‘I gave him a head start.’

‘You turned him into a deer?!’ Waltz repeated. ‘How are we supposed to find him now?’

‘I told you he’s in the woods somewhere.’

‘But how would we recognise him if we even manage to *find* him?’ Waltz complained loudly.

‘He looks different’ the sorcerer replied. ‘I made it so that he stands out in the dark woods. His coat is pure white so that it glows in the shadows, his scent is distinctive so that he is easy to track, his horns look like branches and his tail is long and thin. He is unlike any other deer you would have seen.’

‘Hu?’ Waltz made a comical face.

‘A distinctive scent?’ Sumaey voiced. ‘What does he smell like?’

‘Sour milk.’

Sumaey raised an eyebrow. ‘Why?’

‘To make him stand out’ the sorcerer replied, ‘there’s nothing in the forest that smells like that, so he would be easy to find.’

‘Because the white coat wasn’t enough?’ Sumaey asked. ‘Then why haven’t you found him?’ The sorcerer smiled then.

‘It seems’ he spoke slowly, ‘he has absorbed more of my lessons than I first thought. I have to give him credit. He is not as stupid as he made himself out to be.’

‘So how do we find him?’ Waltz asked crossing his arms.

‘With great difficulty’ the sorcerer replied.

‘So?’ Waltz said expectedly.

‘You’re welcome to begin searching for him’ the sorcerer replied. ‘You can do so for as long as you want. I’ll even let you return to this manor as many times as you need for food and rest. That’s how generous I am.’

‘You’re not going to help us?’ Sumaey asked pointedly.

‘Only if my deerhounds accompany me.’

‘But he’s your apprentice.’

‘Was’ the sorcerer corrected. ‘Now he is even more of a nuisance than before.’ He sighed. ‘I hate unfinished business.’

‘Couldn’t you at least give us some help?’ Waltz moaned.

The sorcerer paused then.

‘There is a single source of water in the forest’ he began at last. ‘For obvious reasons, he cannot stray too far from there. But he is wary, and the forest is large.’ He paused again. ‘You would be lucky to get near enough to yell at him, the instant he sees a man, any man...’ he glanced towards Sumaey then, ‘or woman’ he added, ‘he immediately runs the other way. I have in the past tried to bring my servants with me, but to no avail.’

‘He’ll run away from any human?’ Sumaey echoed.

‘Yes.’

She paused then, turning to glance at Spirit.

The sorcerer noticed this, throwing his head back in laughter. ‘Very good’ he said. ‘It’s almost as if he was brought along for this exact purpose.’

‘The truth is we have only just acquired him’ Sumaey explained. ‘We have no idea what he is capable of.’

‘Even more of a coincidence’ the sorcerer smiled. ‘Very well’ he said. ‘You may begin searching for him. Perhaps you might even succeed where I have failed.’

Shortly after that, the three of them found themselves in the dark and scary forest, with Spirit leading the way.

‘Do you think this is such a good idea?’ Waltz worried, staring wide-eyed all around him.

‘What do you mean?’ Sumaey asked glancing back at him. ‘You’re not afraid are you? I thought you did this sort of thing daily.’

‘I do...but...’

‘Then what is it?’

Waltz grimaced, reluctant to answer.

‘Spiders’ he said at last. ‘I hate spiders.’

‘You have *got* to be *kidding* me’ Sumaey groaned.

Waltz shook his head shyly.

‘What is it with spiders?’ Sumaey asked. ‘Why are so many people afraid of them? Unless they’re poisonous they’re not going to hurt you...and most aren’t.’

‘It’s the way they scuttle’ Waltz reasoned. ‘It’s horrible.’

‘Crabs scuttle.’

‘Yeah but not in the same way.’

‘Now you’re just picking on the spiders.’

‘They deserve it for being so creepy.’

Sumaey groaned loudly again, turning away.

They walked for a short time in silence, before Spirit who walked ahead of them, stopped suddenly.

‘What is it?’ Sumaey hastened. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Shhhh’ Spirit said quietly.

They were close to the water now, and Spirit had sensed something. Sumaey and Waltz both fell silent.

They froze where they stood for several seconds, before Spirit moved; stepping carefully forwards so as not to disturb the forest.

They moved very slowly, in utter silence for several minutes until they reached the lake. Here they knelt in the thicket, watching from a short distance away, the water before them.

For the longest time nothing moved, and then Waltz gave a slight gasp.

From behind one of the trees something moved, its coat as white as fresh snow. The three watched in wonder as the stag moved forwards, head bowed.

It was indeed as the sorcerer had described, with white horns that grew upwards and looked more like tree branches than actual horn.

The three of them watched as it drew closer to the water, bowing its head to drink. But just as it was about to do so, its head shot up and it stared straight in their direction.

A split second later it turned and bolted and was gone.

‘Did it see us?’ Sumaey asked in wonder.

‘I don’t think so’ Spirit replied quietly beside her. ‘It must have smelt you.’

‘He was...’ Waltz uttered, ‘...beautiful.’

Spirit sight heavily.

‘There’s no point in going after it now’ he said. ‘It’s already spooked. We’ll never catch it now. We should come back tomorrow.’

‘He’s right’ Sumaey agreed reluctantly, rising to her feet. ‘We may as well get back to the manor.’

Waltz lingered for a moment, staring back at the lake in the direction the white stag had gone.

‘Waltz?’ Sumaey asked glancing back as Spirit headed off. ‘Are you coming?’
‘Yeah’ he grumbled half-heartedly, turning away from the lake after a moment. ‘I’m coming.’

They returned the next day to the same location, only this time, Spirit requested that Sumaey and Waltz stay back before they had even reached the lake.

‘I have an idea’ Spirit had said to them, tightening his hand on the coil of rope he had brought with him.

‘Why do you have that anyway?’ Waltz asked sceptically.

‘You will see’ Spirit replied. ‘Now stay here.’

‘Who is he to give me orders?’ Waltz demanded of Sumaey as Spirit crawled silently forwards through the forest.

‘Just do as he says’ Sumaey replied wearily.

‘I’m supposed to be the leader of this gang’ Waltz protested

‘Then keep your mouth shut and pretend you know what you’re doing.’

Waltz glowered at her, gritting his teeth and turning sulkily away.

They stayed in this spot for several hours, Sumaey never dropped her guard as she waited. Waltz on the other hand had fallen asleep against a tree, no doubt dreaming of sweet things as he sat there drooling and twitching.

At long last, after even Sumaey was beginning to tire, there came a loud voice in the woods, a call from some distance away. Recognising it as Spirit’s voice, Sumaey leapt to her feet.

‘Get up!’ she snapped at Waltz, kicking him hard in the side.

‘Ow!’ Waltz declared loudly. ‘What the...?’

‘Hurry’ Sumaey snapped at him running away. ‘This way!’

Waltz scrambled to his feet, bending down to grab his trusty sword as he did. He sprinted after her.

They ran through the woods, following the calls.

Soon enough they found Spirit, skidding to a stop at a place far on the other side of the lake. They saw a strange sight indeed.

Spirit had managed to loop the rope around the white stag’s neck, and fought with it as it tried desperately to free itself. The two seemed to be evenly matched in strength, but the stag had the stamina, and Spirit was beginning to tire.

‘Help me!’ he gasped, holding the rope tightly as the stag tried his hardest to pull away.

Sumaey grabbed her own rope she had brought with her that hung at her waist, throwing it out and using her magic to wrap it around the stag’s front legs, while Waltz with his own rope, did the same to the back legs.

The rope around the unfortunate stag’s limbs tightened, and they pulled in the same direction at once, toppling it over. The stag landed hard on its side, bellowing loudly, its eyes wide with fear.

‘WHOOOOOO!’ Waltz so politely declared. ‘We did it!’

‘You mean Spirit did it’ Sumaey interrupted. ‘Good job’ she said turning to him.

Spirit looked a little taken aback, before smiling slightly and bowing his head.

‘You can stop flailing around now’ Sumaey spoke calmly to the stag at her feet. ‘We are not here to hurt you, and we have no deerhounds with us.’

The stag immediately stopped flailing, falling silent. He glanced about him, first one way, then the other, and saw indeed that Sumaey spoke the truth.

There were no deerhounds here.

The stag visibly relaxed, body slumping as he fought the rope no more.

‘Looks like you’ve had a few dangerous encounters’ Sumaey noted, getting a closer look at the stag’s body now. There were little scars and scratches here and there. ‘Those hounds must have gotten pretty close to you.’

The stag stared at her with his orange eyes.

‘We understand your name is Graham’ Waltz spoke up, still holding his end of the rope tightly. ‘Is that true?’

Graham stared at him blankly for a moment, before sticking his tongue out and reaching around to chew the rope that bound his front legs.

‘Stop that!’ Sumaey cried, jerking the rope away from him as Spirit pulled his own rope back, pulling his head away.

Graham continued to reach for the rope, but out of his reach now, all he could do was waggle his tongue, and flick his undeer-like tail hopelessly.

‘We’re taking you back to the manor’ Sumaey told him.

Upon hearing these words Graham began to struggle again, fighting them all with every ounce of strength he had.

‘Stop!’ Sumaey barked. ‘He’s promised not to hurt you. In fact if you come quietly and don’t cause a fuss, he said he would change you back.’

Graham immediately stopped struggling.

Waltz glanced up.

‘Did he say that?’

She shot a dark glare at him, causing Waltz to baulk.

‘Oh...oh yeah!’ he suddenly seemed to remember. ‘He *did* say that. He definitely said that. I was there, she was there, and he was there’ he nodded to Spirit. ‘We all heard it...didn’t we?’ He nodded over-enthusiastically to the others.

Sumaey rolled her eyes at him before turning back to Graham.

‘So?’ she said to him, ‘are you going to be a *good boy*?’

Graham stared at her, lying calmly on the floor between them.

‘Right’ Sumaey said. ‘I’m going to untie your legs, but *he*’ she jerked her head towards Spirit, ‘will keep the noose around your neck tight, just in case you change your mind and decide to run. Okay?’

Graham didn’t reply. He didn’t resist or fight back, so Sumaey took that as a sign that he would comply.

She relaxed her grip, moving forwards to his legs and untying the rope slowly, pausing and glancing up at him one last time before she untied the final knot. She moved to his back legs, doing the same, and Graham at last stood up again, shaking his body like a wet dog, and clearing his fur of leaves and dirt.

‘There’ Sumaey sighed happily. ‘That’s better isn’t it?’

Graham didn’t reply, he only stared at her with his strange eyes.

‘I guess he doesn’t talk’ Waltz said, ‘either that or he’s being stubborn.’
‘No’ Sumaey said. ‘He is unable to speak in that body, once he becomes human again...then he could talk. That is what the sorcerer said.’
‘Hu’ Waltz said, glancing back at Graham who conveyed no expression with his deer-face. ‘It must be strange being in that body and running around on all fours.’
‘Yes’ Sumaey mumbled. ‘Very strange indeed.’

When they returned to the manor, the sorcerer regarded them cynically.
‘So’ he said. ‘My young apprentice returns. I never thought I’d see you again.’
Graham made no sound, in fact he did not react in any way.
‘Tell me’ the sorcerer said raising his head to speak to Spirit. ‘How did you do it?’
‘With great patience’ the water elemental replied, ‘and trickery.’
‘Very good’ the sorcerer nodded. ‘Very good indeed.’
‘Are you going to change him back?’ Waltz asked the sorcerer.
‘No’ he replied shortly.
If a deer could convey the expression of alarm, that is what Graham did then, glaring at Sumaey in a look that clearly said ‘you lied to me.’
‘What, you’re going to keep him like that forever?’ Waltz asked.
‘If he proves himself worthy for me to turn him back, or if he somehow gains the knowledge to do it himself, then he will become human again.’ The sorcerer grinned slyly behind his hand. ‘I wish you the best of luck.’
‘That what are we supposed to do?!’ Waltz protested. ‘Return him to his brother like this? We can’t do that! *What on earth would he think?*’
‘I’m afraid I don’t much care’ the sorcerer confessed. ‘He’s lucky to have the chance to return to his brother at all’ he said. ‘He’s lucky to be alive.’
‘Could you at least stop him smelling of sour milk?’ Sumaey asked politely. ‘It’s rather unpleasant.’
The sorcerer pondered this for a moment.
‘Fine’ he said at last. ‘I suppose that is a reasonable request.’
He strode towards Graham, who fixed him with an unblinking stare.
‘Relax Graham’ the sorcerer told him. ‘One might start thinking that you don’t trust me.’
He waved his hand once over the stag’s head.
Sumaey took a deep breath.
‘Strawberries?’ she made a confused face at the sorcerer.
‘Why not?’ he gleamed slyly, better than what it was before.
He ran his fingers up the stag’s horns then, breaking off a piece at the end.
‘I deliberately made your horns weak’ he said absently, ‘so that they may shatter if you fought back against me. I shall make them stronger now so that you may defend yourself. See this as a kindness’ he said brushing his magic over the horns. ‘You’re welcome.’
The sorcerer stepped back with a look of satisfaction.
‘There’ he said with a smile. ‘Graham is ready to go home and see his brother at last.’

The small band left the manor, heading back to the wizards house with the intention of returning Graham to his brother.

But Graham didn't want to go.

'What's the matter with you?' Waltz demanded, trying to push Graham onwards from behind.

But the stag wasn't shifting.

'Don't you want to see your brother?' Waltz asked.

Graham just moaned at him in reply.

'Perhaps he's afraid to be seen the way he is' Sumaey wondered aloud. 'He will be surprised I'm sure to say the least.'

'Is that it?' Waltz asked the stag. 'You don't want to be seen this way by your brother?'

Graham just moaned at him again.

'I don't know what that means!' Waltz yelled back at him. 'Just keep moving. You don't have a choice, we're taking you back to your bother and that is that!'

Graham dragged his feet until they were out of view of the manor, then he refused to move altogether, even threatening to run away again. But Spirit was watching him closely.

'That's it!' Waltz said losing patience. 'I've had enough of this. You will come with us if it's the last thing I do!'

They resorted to tying rope around the base of his horns, and dragging him the rest of the way, all the while Graham pulled back in the other direction, hooves firmly planted in the ground.

'Will you stop that!' Waltz howled at him. 'I'm losing my patience! Don't make me set fire to your tail to get you moving!'

Graham just roared back at him, his voice deep and bellowing.

'If you're going to make a threat then you should carry it out' Sumaey told him turning back wearily, 'or else he will never take you seriously.'

She raised her hand, summoning her magic to her.

Graham bellowed in pain and fury then as the end of his tail caught fire, he thrashed around breaking free from Waltz's grip on the end of the rope that held him. The rope sailed out of Waltz's hands as Graham ran around, trying to extinguish the flames. The three watched in shock as he whipped his tail around, running in circles kicking at the fire in an attempt to put it out.

The fire quickly died seconds later, and Graham began to pant heavily.

He turned to stare at Sumaey, eyes wild.

He bowed his head, the tips of his horns pointing directly at her.

Graham began to walk forwards, picking up pace until he broke into a run, heading straight for Sumaey who stood there with her arms folded, unmoving as Waltz slowly stepped out of the way.

Graham charged straight for her with all speed. But Spirit came between them suddenly, grabbing Graham roughly by the horns and pushing him back before he could hurt Sumaey.

'You will not harm her' Spirit snarled through gritted teeth, arms beginning to shake with the effort of holding him back. 'You will not harm her.'

Graham glared with wide eyes up at Spirit as he pushed forwards with all his strength.

‘I cannot believe this’ Waltz sighed in despair, slapping his hand to his head. ‘This is the worst team I could possibly have!’ He stared at the three before him. ‘Spirit hates me but loves Sumaey. Graham hates Sumaey *and* Spirit, and Sumaey is indifferent to everyone.’

He laughed again at all of them.

‘How on earth did I get lumped with you lot?’

‘Gee thanks’ Sumaey said flatly. ‘You forgot to mention how much of an idiot you are.’

‘I’m no idiot!’ Waltz protested.

‘Could have fooled me.’

‘You shut your face!’ Waltz snapped. ‘I am the leader here goddamit! I own you all!’

‘The hell you do!’ Sumaey growled.

‘Do not speak to my lady like that’ Spirit demanded.

‘*My lady* is it?’ Waltz echoed in humour. ‘She’s not the freaking queen you know’ he scoffed. ‘How long before you start licking her boots?’

It was at that moment where Sumaey so gracefully sailed towards him, sending a foot to the face.

Waltz fell over in the mud in an undignified manner, with a perfect imprint of a muddy boot on the side of his face.

‘STUPID GIT!’ he hollered, rising to his feet and lunging for her.

‘Do not touch her!’ Spirit howled, releasing Graham and charging for him instead.

The three fought in a ridiculous pile in a mess of dust and stars and limbs flailing everywhere, all the while with Graham staring transfixed at the scene before him.

This was a perfect opportunity to escape, but he was too confused by what was happening before him for the idea to even be considered.

And so he stood there and watched, waiting to see who would win.

Chapter Seventeen The Best Team in the World

They eventually reached the home of the wizard.

The man not called Bob stared at them in confusion.

‘Is this some sort of joke?’ he asked.

‘No’ Waltz answered slowly. ‘...Sorry...’

Not Bob regarded the white stag before him. Graham was completely silent.

‘I asked you to find my brother’ Bob said, ‘and this is what you come back to me with?’

‘Yeah’ Waltz murmured.

Sumaey sighed heavily, crossing her arms and staring away. Behind her Spirit stood mutely.

For some reason the three of them were covered in tiny little cuts and bruises, as if they had been fighting amongst themselves....or something.

‘What is this?’ Bob demanded.

‘Sorry’ Waltz said again. ‘I should probably explain.’

‘You think?’ Bob spoke harshly turning to him. ‘I demand to know the reason for this insult.’

‘It is no insult’ Sumaey told him. ‘We promise you.’ She paused, glancing towards Graham before looking back at not Bob. ‘The sorcerer he was apprenticed to found him...’ she struggled to find the right words.

‘A pain in the arse’ Waltz finished flatly.

‘Right’ Sumaey said. ‘Um...to cut a long story short...the sorcerer turned him into...’ Sumaey glanced towards Graham again.

‘Why does he have cuts and scars over him?’ Bob asked.

‘Um...’ Sumaey said again, reluctant to answer.

‘Go on’ Bob prompted. ‘Tell me, I want to know.’

‘To punish him’ Sumaey went on, ‘the sorcerer turned him into this...then set deerhounds on him.’ She paused. ‘That is why he was unable to write to you...because....he was hiding in the woods for quite some time, and you know...it would be hard to hold a quill....the way he...’

She trailed off.

Bob frowned deeply at this, suddenly greatly concerned.

‘How do I know this is really my brother?’ he asked.

‘Is there something you could do to communicate to him?’ Waltz asked Graham. ‘A sigh perhaps that only *he* would recognise?’

Graham didn’t move.

‘Come on Graham’ Sumaey prompted. ‘He’s your brother, he’s missed you. He’s been worried about you for a long time...that’s why he sent us to find you.’

The white stag raised his head slightly, reluctantly meeting not Bob’s eyes.

‘Please?’ Sumaey asked nicely. ‘He won’t care that you’re like this. I promise.’

‘Come on Graham’ Waltz added. ‘There must be a way for you to show him that it’s really you.’

The stag lowered his head, staring at the floor. He thought for a moment, then he collapsed on the floor, lying on his back with his legs folded and his right front leg pointed to the ceiling. Everyone in the room stared in surprise, and then Bob threw his head back, laughing deeply.

‘Graham’ he sighed happily. ‘So it *is* you!’

‘What the hell was that?’ Waltz asked as Graham picked himself off the floor.

‘Before he died’ Bob answered with amusement, ‘our father was an astrologist. We were all fascinated by the stars. We had a dog at the time. We taught him to lie on his back and point to the sky. Just for fun.’

‘Oh’ Waltz said.

‘I’m sorry this has happened to you’ Bob said to Graham, leaning forward to speak to him.

‘But you’ve gotta admit, you probably deserved it.’

Graham said nothing.

‘Can he speak?’ Bob asked the others.

‘No’ Waltz replied. ‘The sorcerer told us he is unable.’

‘Why does he smell of strawberries?’ Bob asked.

‘Um...’ Waltz began, ‘to make him easier for his hounds to track, the sorcerer made him spell strongly of sour milk. When he brought him back the sorcerer as a kindness changed the smell to strawberries.’

‘Hu’ Bob said straightening again. ‘He has a sense of humour then.’

‘I think he would like to be returned to his original form’ Sumaey suggested politely.

Bob glanced down at his brother, reaching forwards to touch the stag’s white fur.

‘I’m sorry’ he said, ‘but I do not have the power. My master would likely be able to however...but I don’t know where he is, and he likely won’t be back for a very long time.’

He stared down at the white stag with sad eyes, Graham stared back levelly.

‘I wish there was something I could do’ Bob sighed. He glanced up at the others now. ‘I know it’s terribly rude of me, but I’m afraid I must do this.’

‘Do what?’ Waltz asked nervously.

‘I have a request. I know it’s a lot to ask, but it might be appropriate.’

‘What?’ Waltz said again.

‘Would you allow Graham into the new guild you are trying to form?’

‘No’ Waltz said, at the exact same time that Sumaey said ‘yes.’

They glanced at each other.

‘He’s a stubborn pain in the ass’ Waltz protested.

‘That he is’ Bob nodded. ‘I won’t argue with that.’

‘We don’t want him’ Waltz answered shortly.

‘Why not?’ Sumaey argued glaring at him angrily. ‘You want to form your own guild don’t you? Stop being picky.’

‘I’m not being picky’ Waltz agreed.

‘Yes you are.’

Waltz furrowed his brow. ‘He’s a stubborn pain in the ass’ he repeated.

‘So are you’ Sumaey countered.

‘Yeah but I’m in charge.’

‘We’ve been through this.’

‘I’ll consider it in exchange for a horse’ Waltz said speaking to Bob now.

‘What?’ Bob said. ‘But I already gave you one.’

‘We lost it’ Waltz told him. ‘Well actually...’ he glanced towards Spirit, ‘*he* scared it away.’

Bob glanced at the water elemental. Spirit did not react as he stared back at him.

‘You followed them’ Bob said. ‘You seem to have formed a strange attachment to Sumaey.’

He paused. ‘I’m afraid I cannot give you another horse. That was my only one.’

‘What?’

‘Too bad’ Bob said.

Waltz gritted his teeth angrily, balling his fists. ‘I don’t think Graham would want to join us anyway’ he said.

‘Does he not?’ Bob glanced down at him. ‘Well it’s his best chance to find a way to change himself back. As I said, it would likely be a very long time until my master returns. Your new guild you are trying to form’ he said addressing Waltz now, ‘would no doubt be travelling far and wide. You might even find someone who could help him, and help Sumaey regain her memory as to who she really is and where she came from.’

Waltz grimaced as Sumaey suddenly looked interested.

‘He would be a liability’ Waltz complained.

‘Alright’ Bob said, ‘how about this? In exchange for taking him on, I will give you a gift that you could potentially count as another member of your guild. Then you would only be one member short to being able to officially register your new guild.’

‘What gift?’ Waltz asked, his curiosity peaked now.

‘I’ll have to find it’ Bob said distractedly, scratching at his chin. ‘Give me a moment.’

He went into the next room, Sumaey and Waltz stepped forward curiously to watch as he rummaged through the dark room.

‘I haven’t been in this room for ages’ Bob said absent-mindedly as he moved through the room, searching for something. ‘This is more of a storage room than anything else’ he went on, ‘my master over a long period of time has left things here when he doesn’t know what else to do with them, or when has lost interest in them.’ He seemed to find what he was looking for, grabbing hold of it and dragging across the floor back to where the others waited patiently. It sounded heavy, sounded metallic.

The room he had brought it from was pitch black, nothing inside could be seen, and as the others gazed down at Bob as he knelt before the thing he dragged, they saw as he wiped the thick layer of dust from it, the thing come to life.

‘His name is Loxus’ Bob smiled down at it, ‘and he has been here for a very long time.’

The best way to describe the thing that sat before them, curling its legs to stand and lifting its tail as it pushed itself up, would be a steam punk spider-scorpion, with blank eyes and a lantern hanging from the end of its tail.

(Please refer to the cover)

‘What is it?’ Waltz asked, arching his eyebrow.

‘It is a curiosity’ Bob replied with a smile, ‘and you can have it, as long as you agree to accept my brother into the guild you are trying to form.’

Sumaey and Spirit watched Waltz expectantly as he stared down at the thing.

‘What does it do?’ he asked Bob uncertainly.

‘Many things’ Bob replied vaguely. ‘You will find out in time. It has the same level of intelligence as most people’ he said, ‘and can understand every word we speak right now.’

Waltz glanced back down at the thing that stood there on the floor calmly before them.

He frowned uncertainly.

‘I don’t know’ he said. ‘This wasn’t really what I was expecting to get when I first thought of forming my own guild.’

Bob smiled at that. ‘All great things have started small’ he said. ‘Just think of who you admire most in this world.’

Waltz thought who that might be, and then he realised.

The strongest guild recognised by the bureau in this kingdom. They had just three members. But together, they had almost god-like powers, and were practically indestructible and invincible and immortal all at the same time.

‘I want to succeed’ Waltz whispered, balling his fists and trembling with excitement. ‘I want to be great like *they* are.’

He stared down at the strange mechanical thing.

He was more curious about it than anything else, and decided suddenly that he wanted to see what it could do.

‘Fine’ he said at last. ‘I will take both of them.’

‘Excellent’ Bob beamed merrily. ‘I think you will be very happy indeed.’

Waltz glanced down at the thing.

‘Um...’ he began uncertainly. ‘Come here boy...’

The spider-lantern raised one of its spindly legs, moving very slowly forwards. It stopped right before him.

‘He might be a little stiff at first’ Bob said. ‘He hasn’t moved in quite a long time. You might want to oil his joints and give him a polish, then he should be good to go.’

‘Alright’ Waltz said. ‘I accept.’

‘You will all have wonderful adventures together’ Bob declared. ‘I just know it.’

He surveyed the group with amusement then, looking at them closely each in turn.

He spoke.

‘A warrior, a woman who fell from the sky and does not know who she is, a failed apprentice to a sorcerer who is disguised as a deer, a water elemental who has lost his loved ones, and a piece of scrap metal masquerading as a mix between a spider a scorpion and a lantern.’ He smirked playfully to himself, greatly amused. ‘What a team you will make.’

‘How droll’ Waltz replied flatly, crossing his arms. ‘How droll. Why do I suspect you are engaging in some private joke at our expense?’

Chapter Eighteen

One more to Go

Waltz sighed contentedly as a servant poured a jug of warm soapy water over his head.

‘I tell you what’ Waltz said, tilting his head back and blinking his eyes as the modestly dressed young woman moved to fill the jug again, ‘this is the life.’

‘Are you sure about this?’ Sumaey asked him, turning away from the window she stood by.

‘Are you sure we can afford such luxuries like this? We haven’t had any work for quite a while.’

‘Oh come on’ Waltz smiled up at her. He was sitting in a round bath set in the smooth wooden floor, the room they were in was small, and a single servant attended their needs.

It was a guest house they were in at the moment, and there were rooms to stay in overnight, and baths to wash in and several larger rooms where food was served. The building was a large one, with many oval windows that let the light pour in. Each room was open and painted in bright colours with pleasant pictures on the walls. Flowers in a meadow, a fluffy fox playing with her cubs, a butterfly sitting on a foal’s nose.

‘I like it here’ Waltz was saying, ‘it’s nice to indulge yourself once in a while.’

Sumaey glanced back out the window as the servant poured another jug of warm water over his head.

‘Ahhhhh’ Waltz sighed happily.

Sumaey stared at the garden outside. From here she could see the others that accompanied them, the rest of their strange guild.

Spirit was sitting on a bench mutely, ignoring the peculiar looks some of the other guests gave him. Before him was Graham and Loxus, the strange pair were walking around the garden, around and around several times, Graham constantly following wherever the spider-lantern would go. It had been well oiled now, his joints no longer creaked, and his surface once again was clean, shining a beautiful bronze. It looked magnificent. However, the white stag and the strange metallic creature he followed earned their fair share of odd looks.

‘How are the others doing?’ Waltz asked.

Sumaey turned back to him.

‘They are doing fine.’

‘Mmmmm’ he said, as the servant poured another jug of the lovely water over his white-blond hair. ‘Lovely...’ he said.

The small army of yellow rubber ducks bobbed in the water around him, and Waltz glanced towards the other side of the modest bath, where there was another figure, a man with a fishy tail, a merman. His long blonde hair was bristly, and it didn’t change shape in the water. He was afraid of green, his skin was so slimy, he was afraid of birds (especially crows but not rubber ducks because they’re so cute) he doesn’t like people staring too intently at his scales because you can find out a fish’s age from the pattern of its scales, he hates being cold, he loves to eat, he loves bubbles, has a friend called Takasu whom he had known for over a century.

His name is Wakasa by the way.

Waltz raised his hand, waving at him.

The merman raised his hand, waving merrily back.

‘We still have one more’ Sumaey spoke up.

‘Hm?’ Waltz said.

‘One more guild member to find’ Sumaey told him, ‘before you can officially register your new guild.’

‘It’s an exciting thought isn’t it’ Waltz gleamed at her, ‘being part of something great.’

‘Yes’ Sumaey mumbled distractedly. She went quiet for a moment. ‘We’re running out of money’ she told Waltz. ‘We have to take a job soon.’

‘I know’ Waltz said.

‘We should leave here soon’ she continued, ‘this place is too costly for us.’

‘We’ll leave first thing in the morning’ Waltz said, ‘and head to the nearest tavern. There’s bound to be some jobs posted there.’

Sumaey nodded approvingly, before turning away again to stare out the window.

‘Tomorrow then’ she said, ‘we shall make our way.’

The next morning, Waltz awoke bright and early. He sat up in his bed, yawning and stretching happily. It was a small room he had, but like the rest of the rooms in the guesthouse, was brightly lit by the sun that shone through the oval window.

‘Ahhhhhh...’ Waltz sighed contentedly. ‘This is the life.’

He then had a strange and random thought.

The strongest guild recognised in the lands, the one comprised of only three members.....this must be how they live most days.

He sighed again, closing his eyes.

‘Must be nice’ he mumbled.

He threw his sheets back, rising from his bed and stretching.

‘I’m sure going to miss this place.’

He dressed quickly and went downstairs for breakfast, to find Sumaey and Spirit already at a table, both had nearly finished eating their breakfast.

Waltz glanced down at Spirit’s plate, to see there eggs and bacon and toast.

‘I’m surprised you can eat the same stuff as us’ Waltz noted. ‘I half-expected you to be eating raw fish and squid.’

Spirit raised his head, giving Waltz a flat expression.

Waltz baulked, grinning sheepishly and turning away.

‘So’ he spoke loudly to Sumaey, ‘where are our good friends Graham and Loxus?’

Sumaey glanced up at him with a bored expression, before returning her attention back to her plate.

‘They’re outside chasing each other.’

‘Hm’ Waltz said. ‘They are a strange pair aren’t they?’

‘They are.’

Sumaey raised her head. ‘Where do we go from here?’

Waltz bit his lip in thought before answering.

‘There is a tavern just a few miles from here’ he said. ‘I’ve been there before. There is a huge bulletin board. There will be several messages on it of various sorts, quests and so forth, stuff for sale, lost kittens.’

Sumaey glanced back down at her breakfast.

‘This bacon is delicious’ she told him. ‘You should try some.’

Waltz stared hungrily down at her plate, mouth beginning to water.

‘I’ll be back in a second’ he said hurriedly, shuffling towards the kitchen to beg for some delicious breakfast.

A short time later after they had all finished, the three went outside to find Graham and Loxus waiting for them.

‘Hey fellas!’ Waltz beamed at them. ‘Are you ready for an adventure?’

Graham made no reaction. Loxus raised one of his spindly legs as if in agreement. The strange spider-lantern creature had perked up a lot since they had first met with it. Despite the fact that it was unable to convey any emotions in its face, the creature had turned out to be in fact quite expressive in its body language. It would often raise itself up on its spindly legs, reach out and grab things, even attempt to shake people’s hands, twisting its tail back and forth when it was excited, and even hold its lantern over people’s heads when it was dark.

It was indeed as Bob had informed them. The thing was far more like a human than most would like to believe.

‘We’re just travelling down the road’ Waltz told them. ‘I hope you’re ready for some exercise.’

Loxus began to prance on the spot. Waltz didn’t know if he was excited for a nice walk or for the prospect of going on an adventure. Or perhaps it was both!

‘Right’ Waltz nodded happily. ‘Are we ready to have some fun?!’

Loxus shook his tail, rattling the lantern hanging on the end.

‘Yay!’ Waltz said again. ‘Walkies!’

It was at that moment when Sumaey smacked him on the back of the head.

‘Stop getting him excited.’

Waltz turned to her with a grimace, rubbing the sore patch on his head. He spied over Sumaey’s shoulder now, what appeared to be another guild. They were few in number, but the horses they had were magnificent.

Waltz sighed wearily, feeling a great sadness for the horse he had lost, for which he still blamed Spirit, though he didn’t say it out loud, everyone knew how he felt.

‘Come on’ Sumaey said, speaking more softly now. ‘Let’s get going.’

Waltz lifted the bag he carried higher on his shoulder, trudging forwards as Sumaey walking after him, carried her own. Even Spirit carried some of their bags now, as they had no horse to do it for them, but Graham flat out refused to carry so much as a single blanket.

In time Waltz thought slyly, casting a sideways glance towards him. *He’ll be carrying all our stuff...in time...*

He looked forwards again, making his way down the road with the strange group around him. They were about to leave the property belonging to the guesthouse, when Waltz spotted something.

A beautiful girl dressed in black and white, with very thick long white hair tied into a plate with a rope tied neatly at the end in the shape of a ribbon. There were great silver bells hanging from her clothes, what looked like a large dream catcher in the back of her hair, and a shining silver flute she carried at her side.

Waltz paused, staring at her in the distance as she walked towards the guest house they were leaving.

Sumaey hesitated, glancing back as she noticed Waltz’s distraction.

‘She’s too young for you’ she told Waltz hastily.

‘Shhh’ he hissed sharply back at her, not taking his eyes off the girl. ‘Look at her.’

Sumaey stopped, turning to stare at the girl.

‘So?’ she shrugged. ‘What about her?’

‘She’s beautiful.’

Sumaey scowled.

‘Do you see the flute she carries?’ Waltz explained further.

Sumaey looked.

‘So?’

‘It’s a magical flute, used to control other beings. I’ve seen things like that before. It takes a great deal of skill to use one efficiently. I’ve never seen one so young carry such a thing.’

‘Perhaps she’s carrying it for a friend?’ Sumaey suggested.

Waltz hesitated, never breaking his gaze from the girl.

He stepped towards her, walking away from Sumaey.

‘Waltz? Where are you going?’

‘I’m just going to speak to her’ Waltz said distractedly. ‘Wait here.’

Sumaey glowered at him, eyes boring into the back of his head.

She waited for about three seconds before deciding....

‘Like hell I’m waiting here...I’m not a dog.’

She followed after him.

Waltz jogged up to the girl.

‘Excuse me’ he said.

The girl looked around.

‘What is your name?’ Waltz asked her.

‘It’s Emma’ the girl replied uncertainly.

‘And is that flute yours?’ Waltz asked, as Sumaey appeared behind him, Spirit, Loxus and finally Graham following in a line slowly after her.

Emma glanced down at the flute she carried, hugging it to her.

‘Yes’ she said. ‘It’s mine, and I’m very proud of it.’

‘A magical flute!’ Waltz said excitedly. ‘What sort of things can you control with it?’

‘Everything’ Emma replied.

‘But you’re so young.’

‘Don’t judge me by my age’ she answered moodily as Spirit, Loxus and Graham approached.

Emma brought the flute to her delicate lips, playing a tune. Though it was utterly silent.

Waltz and Sumaey stared at her in confusion, watching her fingers move across the holes in the instrument, though hearing no sound.

Suddenly Graham raised his head, pulling the bag that Waltz carried from him and throwing it over his own back so that it was perfectly balanced there. He did the same to Sumaey, taking the bag from her and offering silently to carry it. Then he stood there obediently.

Both Waltz and Sumaey stared at him in shock (Spirit was unperturbed) before glancing back at Emma.

‘There’ she said. ‘He will now carry your things for you.’ She paused. ‘You look like a guild. How come you don’t have any horses?’

‘Um...’ Waltz began uncertainly. ‘We aren’t a registered guild yet. We still need one more member.’ And then he faltered, staring at her. ‘Hey, how would you like to join our guild?’

‘Join a guild?’ she mimicked. ‘I’ve never considered such a thing.’

‘Well why not?’ Waltz asked. ‘We go on many adventures, and will go on many more when we are officially registered. We are just one short.’

‘I don’t know’ Emma sighed. ‘I came here to visit my father. He is in a guild himself you know. He told me to stay away from such things.’

‘But why?’

Emma hesitated, tilting her head at Waltz.

‘All of his limbs are automail’ she said. ‘Prosthetic. Made of metal.’

‘I see’ Waltz mumbled dipping his head sadly.

‘I have always longed for adventure’ she said, ‘ever since I learned to read and learned of all those wonderful stories in the books that mother bought me. But my father has always said its nothing but trouble, and that it’s too dangerous...but still.’

‘Perhaps you should do what *you* want’ Waltz suggested, ‘rather than making decisions based on other people’s opinions.’

‘But he’s my father.’

‘But what do *you* want to do?’ Waltz asked her.

She hesitated, bowing her head and hugging her flute to her chest.

‘I want to see the world’ she admitted, ‘and all the wonderful creatures in it. I want to test the limits of my powers, and see how strong a creature I am able to control with it, for even my father does not know.’

‘Then why don’t you?’

Emma glanced up, meeting Waltz’s gaze.

‘Responsibility’ she answered.

Waltz cocked his head.

‘You could be an asset to us’ Sumaey spoke up, standing with a hand on her hip. ‘We are only small right now, but we are hoping to become bigger, perhaps one day we could be something great. It would of course be dangerous, but you will never experience the things we will experience if you live what most would call a *normal* life.’

‘The way you word it’ Emma said, ‘I don’t know if that would be a good thing or not.’

‘Make of it what you will’ Sumaey shrugged.

Waltz glanced back at her with a strange expression, before looking back at Emma again.

‘What do you say?’ Waltz offered.

‘I don’t know’ Emma replied hesitantly. ‘I am in a difficult place in my life. Things are complicated. I want to pursue my own goals, but it is hard right now.’

‘Perhaps you should meet up with us later’ Sumaey suggested.

‘That may be a good idea’ Emma mused.

‘Do you know where the bureau is?’ Waltz asked her.

‘The bureau?’

‘Yes. It’s a big and fancy building where the various guilds throughout the land are managed.’

‘Yes’ Emma mumbled. ‘I think I have heard of it before.’

‘Do you know where it is?’

‘I could ask my father’ Emma told them. ‘He would know.’

It was at that moment when they saw a fox appear from behind her, coming out from hiding. Its typical red coat was lush and its body and tail long with eyes bright and ears perked up.

‘Wow’ Waltz breathed at the sight of it. ‘Have you tamed it?’

‘Tamed?’ Emma repeated glancing down. ‘No. It is the power of the flute that makes it this way.’

She glanced around then, as if she suddenly heard a noise coming from the guesthouse.

‘I have to go’ she said. ‘My father is waiting for me.’

‘What is your answer?’ Waltz called after her as she moved away.

Emma paused, glancing back at the strange group.

‘I don’t know’ she replied, ‘but I know I could find the bureau if I needed to. If I am interested in joining you, then I will meet you there a week from now. But I have to go.’

She ran away and out of sight before Waltz could say anymore. He had reached out to her, as if hoping to grab her to speak to her again. But she had gone.

‘Wow’ he said again, speaking in a whisper. ‘She is incredible isn’t she?’

Sumaey huffed tiredly, turning away again.

‘Come on’ she said. ‘The tavern is not that far.’

Chapter Nineteen
So That's Why my hair is Pink

The tavern was not that far.

Waltz and Sumaey walked mostly in silence down the dirt road, seeing occasionally a figure or two passing them by in the other direction, every time their attention would linger on the strange band that traversed the road.

The supposedly normal looking man and woman, followed by what looked like a water elemental, beside which walked a white stag with horns like branches and a metallic scorpion-spider-lantern thing.

One of the figures that passed them was an old man, sighing and shaking his head as he rode his old shaggy pony in the opposite direction.

'Kids these days...' he sighed. 'I just don't understand them...'

Waltz glanced back at him as they went, before looking ahead again.

'Ah' he said with satisfaction as they rounded a bend in the road. 'There is the tavern. See? It wasn't that far.'

It was a modest building in size, made with a roof of red tiles, tons of flowers everywhere (around the door and below the windows and overflowing in the little flower beds that were scattered everywhere) and there were horses belonging to the guests lined up near the entrance, standing there patiently.

Waltz's pace slowed as they made their way towards the front door, he sighed longingly as he stared at the many horses all tied up and waiting for their masters to return. He remembered how he had lost his beloved Squishy, whom he had owned for far too short a time.

'It's not fair...' Waltz lamented in a quiet voice, before moving off and following after the others that had entered the tavern already.

It was an extremely pleasant and happy environment inside. It was crowded, full of all sorts of people of all ages, all cultures, all backgrounds. There were families with young children eating together, drunk soldiers (even though it was the middle of the day) gypsies singing merry tunes together in their family bands, exotic men and woman of dark and beautiful skin, people with funny hats, even creatures that were only part-human.

As Waltz followed after his guild, he saw at the edge of the room, sitting upon a table, an earth elemental. She was striking, with bright green skin, glowing eyes and a curvy body that was mostly naked.

Her eyes lingered on Spirit as they moved by, but he kept his eyes to the ground, seeming not to notice her.

Behind this strange earth elemental, were two other figures, both gypsies, both winged, one man and one woman. The woman wore a deep red dress, with wine coloured hair and blood-red wings like that of a butterfly. The man beside her also had butterfly wings, like the woman, but his were pointed at the ends while hers were curved. Every inch of his wings

were as brightly coloured as his clothes, with thick black edges. He was striking to look at, they both were.

The billboard they sought was at the back of the large room. The guild had to pass the bar as they made their way towards it. Upon the bar sitting beside a candle burning inside an empty bottle, was a cat and a baby dragon, sitting side by side and watching the environment around them.

Sumaey approached the board. The other guild members lingered, forming a half-circle behind her.

‘Right’ Sumaey began, ‘let’s see what he have here.’

Their eyes scanned the board. There were many things placed here, not just jobs, but things for sale, messages to people, love letters, announcements of births, death, marriages and divorces. Announcements of important events and celebrations and anything else you could possibly imagine. The notices on the billboard would often change from day to day.

Sumaey and Waltz read some of notices:

Scarecrow wanted

A volunteer is wanted to work as a scarecrow in a field near my house
(weekends only)

No previous experience is needed as full training will be given

Must be able to stand up for several hours without a break and have no fear of birds

MASSIVE REWARD FOR CAPTURE OF STRANGE MASKED FIGURE

**FIGURE IS ALWAYS DRESSED ALL IN BLACK, WITH BLACK
GLOVES AND A RAISED HOOD (BLACK)
WEARS A CROWS MASK WITH A LONG BEAK AND LARGE
EYES**

**1 00,000 BILLION REWARD FOR CAPTURE AND
SAFE DELIVERY**

Evil genius seeking minions to sacrifice their lives in world domination attempt

Slave labour needed

Freedom after 10 pm

Free food included

Wanted

Sales assistant who won't quit after 2 months, can take a joke and won't cry everyday on the floor

*Doctor wanted for a new health clinic opening in
the area. No experience needed.*

Must have own tools

Free to good home

Beautiful six month old kitten, adorable, playful and very affectionate

OR

Husband with a good job but doesn't like cats (says he goes or cat goes)

Possibly stole someone's cat when I was drunk last night

Black and white, thought he was a stray but noticed his collar this morning. Name is Twinkles, though he does not answer to it. Please take him back as he keeps trying to sleep on my face.

Free human sized hamster wheel – shredded newspaper included

A real life ghost trapped in a box

Uses for pet ghost:

Scare your kids if they misbehave

Spy on your neighbours

Scare your friends

Make things float through the air

Scare yourself when you forget you have a pet ghost

Listen to spooky noises throughout the night

Learn about the afterlife

Love your ghost

Lost pants

May be in a tree somewhere, or stuck on someone's roof just waiting to be found

Goat for sale

Has psychic abilities
Loves to watch you sleep
Has eyes that pierce the very soul
(loves to lick things and go 'ragdoll')
(eerie theme music included)

[illegible]

'No decent jobs out there right now' Sumaey grumbled, straightening again and flicking her hair back.

‘Oh well’ Waltz said, scratching the back of his head. ‘I guess the only thing left to do is to blow the last of the money we have.’

'If you say so' Sumaey replied distractedly.

‘Wanna get a drink?’ Waltz offered.

Sumaey thought. ‘Yeah’ she said. ‘Go on then.’

A large portion of Waltz's memory was lost shortly after that.

The next thing he knew was that it was morning, and he woke one the floor surrounded by several different and beautiful women (none of which were Sumaey by the way)

'What the crud?' Waltz groaned, sitting up gingerly, hand going to his aching head.

He suddenly noticed the women around him, scattered about the room in various states of undress.

'What happened last night...' he murmured, '...how did I get here?'

The other women around him were fast asleep, their chests rising and falling gently.

There was only one other figure in the room besides from Waltz who was awake, and she was waiting for him.

'Good morning' the woman said flatly, turning to face him in her seat by the window.

'You're awake at last.'

A young and pretty woman sat in the chair before him, with a kawai face and adorable glossy lipstick. She wore a short pink skirt, a pink frilly top, pink tights and little pink shoes. Her hair was short and curly and pink, as were her eyes.

'Candy Cake?!' Waltz gasped.

She rose to her feet, stomping forwards and towering over him.

She was quite mad (to say the least) and looked like she wanted to murder him.

'What is the meaning of this?'

Waltz hesitated. 'This isn't how it looks!' he panicked.

'It isn't?' Candy Cake sneered down at him. 'Then how is it really?'

Waltz's brain throbbed.

'I don't remember.'

For a moment he could have sworn that he saw her eyes turn red, or was it just his own imagination playing tricks on him?

'I thought you loved me' she hissed, balling her fists in rage.

Waltz saw a blinding flash of white light, he felt an excruciating pain in his head (the headache didn't help much) and then she was gone.

Waltz blinked in confusion, wondering what had just happened.

One of the women nearest him stirred, groaning as she sat up. She smiled at him. 'Morning.' And then she furrowed her brow at him, as if suddenly noticing something out of the ordinary.

'What?' Waltz said defensively. 'What is it?'

At that precise moment, the door to the room opened and Sumaey strode in.

'There you are' she said, 'you're awake.'

'Where have you been?' he asked her.

She gave him a funny look, the same look the woman lying beside him was still giving him.

'I've been out on a job' Sumaey told him, raising a coin purse that jingled merrily. 'Spirit and Loxus and I.'

'Not Graham?'

'No. He was too busy eating grass.'

'Why didn't I come along?' Waltz asked.

Sumaey paused.

‘You were off your face’ she told him. ‘You said you wanted to stay here and play twister.’

‘What?’

‘You don’t remember?’ she raised an eyebrow, then sniggered at him.

‘No’ Waltz huffed indignantly back, feeling that she was making fun of him.

Sumaey bent down, lifting a white sheet that was covered in large and brightly coloured dots.

‘You looked like you were having a lot of fun’ she told him.

‘Why am I only wearing my underwear?’ Waltz asked, as several of the other women around them began to sit up.

Sumaey considered him.

‘It was hot last night’ she told him flatly

Waltz raised his head at her, shielding his eyes from the bright light from outside.

‘Why do you keep giving me that face?’

Sumaey paused, as if wondering whether or not to tell him.

‘Did you know that your hair is pink?’

‘What?!’

‘Yeah...’ Sumaey replied carelessly.

Waltz leapt up, storming over to the mirror.

‘AAAAHHHHHH!’ He screamed at the sight of himself. ‘What have you done Candy Cake?!’

Behind him Sumaey was examining her nails lazily.

‘Who is Candy Cake?’ she asked.

‘A young woman who is obsessed with me’ he answered shortly. ‘She’s a fairy. She has just visited me, right before you arrived.’ He paused. ‘She was very angry with me.’

Sumaey took in the room her, and the women who were picking themselves off the floor, one by one slowly waking up.

‘How could this happen?’ Waltz wailed as if it was the end of the world.

‘Gods will you keep your voice down?’ one of the women complained grasping her head as she sat on the floor beside him. ‘It’s too early in the morning for this.’

Waltz turned to her, staring at her intently.

A brief memory flashed in his mind. A memory of himself dancing with a large group of people, the music lively, he was dancing with maracas and wearing a funny hat.

Waltz blinked slowly, running his hands down his face tiredly.

He looked at the room again. The various women were getting dressed all around him.

‘Nice hair’ one of them smirked.

‘What happened to me?’ Waltz asked her in a pleading voice. ‘Did I really do those things?’

The woman nearest him (a red head) gave him a funny face. ‘You mean dance aggressively with no respect for other people’s personal space? Yes....’

‘And you thought’ one of the other women said (a blonde) ‘that you should express your most personal and emotional feeling through the medium of dance.’

‘And when that didn’t work’ another women said (a slightly darker blonde) ‘you decided to shout your deepest, darkest secrets as loud as you can for the whole world to hear.’

‘Then you fell asleep on the bar’ another woman (black hair) added. ‘.....nice hair by the way...’

‘Why are there only women here?’ Waltz asked dubiously, unsure if he even wanted to hear the answer.

Sumaey pursed her lips at him when he said this.

‘The men didn’t want to play twister’ she replied. ‘They said that it was lame.’

‘Oh....’

‘Come on’ Sumaey told him exasperatedly as the women slowly filed out the room. ‘We’re supposed to me making our way to the bureau remember?’

‘Are you kidding?!’ Sumaey squawked at her. ‘I can’t be seen like this!’

‘I think it looks quite nice’ she sniggered.

‘Are you kidding me?!’ he howled. ‘I look like a fruit loop!’

Sumaey sighed, turning away and staring out of the window.

‘The others are waiting for us’ she said, seeing Spirit sitting in the garden beside Loxus, who was motionless, and Graham who was lying on his side, like a cat stretched out in the sun.

‘It’s going to take us a long time to get there on foot.’

But Waltz was not listening.

‘What am I going to do?’ he worried turning to her. ‘Do you have any hair products?’

‘No’ she said, giving him an expression as if he had just vomited a slug. ‘Do you really think I have a hair salon hidden under my skirt?’

Waltz straightened up, staring at her flatly.

‘....what skirt?’ he said.

They argued for a bit after that and Sumaey stormed off in a mood while Waltz tried to fix his hair.

Several days passed, in which Waltz did everything in his power, and everything he could think of (including using magic) to turn his hair back to the way it had been before – white-blond.

But nothing worked.

In the end Sumaey resorted to knocking him out with wine she had laced with a very heavy drug, then proceeded to tie him with large portions of rope to Graham’s back, to a cheap saddle she had bought, and jogging the rest of the way to the bureau to make up for time. She didn’t want to miss Emma after all, if the girl did decide to join their guild, and several days had already passed thanks to Waltz. Now they were short on time.

When she finally reached the bureau, she was exhausted.

‘We made it...’ she huffed.

‘Made it?’ Spirit asked beside her, breathing heavily.

She wiped her brow with the back of her hand, straightening up again.

‘Emma said she would meet us here at this time’ she told the water elemental. ‘If she has decided to join us, then this is where she will be.....waiting for us right now.’

Spirit turned silently away.

‘She might be inside’ Sumaey thought aloud. ‘I have never been to this place before.’

Suddenly there was a groan behind her.

Waltz was beginning to stir.

‘Well look who’s finally awake’ Sumaey said dryly to him. ‘Just you enjoy your *nap*?’

Waltz licked his dry mouth, swallowing with difficulty.

‘Where are we?’ he asked in a husky voice, gingerly untying himself. And then his eyes widened as he looked up. ‘The bureau!’ he said. ‘We’re here!’

‘And Emma might also be here too’ Sumaey told him.

The strange group looked up at the tall white building before them, even Loxus with his blank eyes seemed to be looking.

It was an impossibly tall building, made of pure white stone, with massive columns that held up its vast size, and many narrow rectangular windows. The stairway that ascended to the bureau that was elevated above the rest of the buildings around, was as wide as the entire front of the building itself. The steps were designed in such a way as to make it easy for horses to walk up and down, with a considerable distance before the next step, and only a slight increase per step.

It was an adventure merely reaching the front doors, people bustled all around, on the steps and in the streets amongst the smaller buildings below. It was a busy environment, but not an unpleasant one.

The bureau.

It was a truly magnificent building.

‘Come on’ Sumaey mumbled quietly, stepping forwards. ‘Let’s go inside.’

Chapter Twenty

The Slayer

Waltz slid off Graham’s back as they went along, giving the white stag a curious glance, finding it odd that he had carried him without fuss. Ever since Emma had done *something* to him, he had been just as difficult as before, though now he was far more willing to carry whatever they needed.

‘I hope she’s there’ he lamented.

‘What?!’ Sumaey snapped back at him. ‘Speak up!’

‘Nothing’ Waltz said a bit louder.

She glowered at him before facing ahead again, marching onwards.

They entered the massive doors of the bureau, which were always kept open, always, be it night or day.

They strode across the massive halls, catching a glimpse of only a small part of the bureau as they passed through, the various offices and officials dressed in their gold and brown robes, in the centre of which was the depiction of a diamond with a crescent moon inside. The symbol was so old, even the bureau had forgotten what it meant, though they continued to wear it all the same. It was tradition after all.

As they made their way to the correct room, after consulting a large diagram of a map (the layout of the building and where to go for what) they saw the most interesting collection of beings a person could have seen *anywhere*.

Creature that were so bizarre that they had no name, other creatures that were very common (like centaurs and angels and friendly dragons, goblins and even a werewolf who was for some reason trapped in its animal form, even though it was midday) there was also a colossus that was so large that it filled the entire room (don't ask how it got there) and seemed to be made of both earth, living matter, and stone (and was completely friendly). There were also people of every possible background you could imagine, from beggars in rags to powerful lords with immeasurable magic in their fingertips.

'Here we are' Sumaey said coming to a stop.

They had reached a section of corridor, at the end of which was a great desk of dark wood, behind there sat a bored looking man. Behind him was a larger room that opened out into what looked like other smaller offices.

'Are you ready?' Sumaey asked, glancing back at Waltz.

Waltz took a deep breath, balling his fists.

'No' he said, before taking a step forwards towards the desk.

They approached the desk slowly, Waltz and Sumaey walking side by side. Behind them Spirit, Graham and Loxus followed, Loxus's metallic feet clicking lightly on the smooth stone as they made their way forwards.

The bored looking man behind the desk glanced up as he heard this sound.

'Oh' he said, sounding genuinely interested for about half a second as he spotted the bizarre metallic contraption coming his way, before he lost interest and looked back down again.

Waltz and Sumaey stopped before the desk as the man continued to scrawl his illegible writing on the paper before him.

Waltz waited for a moment, before clearing his throat, doing so in what he hoped was a polite manner.

The bored looking man paused, placing his pen down on the desk. He folded his hands and looked up at them.

'Yes?'

'We wanted to register a new guild' Waltz said to him, standing with his hands behind his back.

The official blinked slowly, glancing at each of the figures before him in turn.

'You're one short' he told them.

'We were supposed to meet another here' Waltz told him nervously. 'A girl called Emma...she has long white hair?'

'She's not here' the official droned.

'What?'

'I said' the official told Waltz patiently, 'that no one has turned up in the waiting room today. No one, and no girl with white hair.'

Sumaey turned away, shaking her head. 'I guess she decided not to come after all.'

'We were supposed to meet her here' Waltz told the man desperately. 'She was supposed to complete our guild so that we may register.'

'Well she's not here' the man told them, 'so you cannot register.'

‘Hey!’ called a voice from the room behind the man. ‘Are you nearly finished yet? The rest of us are going now!’

‘Be there in a minute’ the man called back.

‘What’s going on?’ Waltz asked.

The official glanced at him.

‘We’re going on holiday’ he replied, ‘myself and everyone else in this office.’

‘But that means...’ Waltz began slowly.

‘Yes...’ the official groaned beginning to pack up his things from the desk, ‘a new guild will not be able to be registered until we get back.’

‘How long will you be gone for?’ Sumaey asked.

‘Three years.’

‘*Three years?!*’ Waltz squeaked. ‘That’s a long holiday!’

The official gave him an impatient look.

‘We work very hard’ he droned. ‘We don’t have a single day off for whole years, when we do have a holiday; we have a very long one. Come back in three years.’

‘But we want to register our guild now’ Waltz demanded. ‘I can’t wait for three years!’

‘Then do you have another member?’ the man sighed, growing impatient.

‘Hey!’ the man’s friend called from the other side of the room. ‘We’ve got to go!’

‘Coming!’ the man called back, turning away from his desk.

‘Hold on a minute’ Waltz cried desperately.

‘You’re one member short’ the man snapped irritably. ‘I cannot help you.’

‘Just give me thirty seconds’ Waltz urged him. ‘Please?’

The official gritted his teeth.

‘Make it a quick thirty seconds’ the official said, ‘in case you hadn’t noticed, I’m a little short on time right now.’

Waltz turned on his heel and ran away, Sumaey and Spirit watched him go, wondering where he was going and what he was up to.

Waltz ran out into the corridor, skidding to a stop. He glanced first one way, then another. On one side of the corridor, he saw a man sitting on the floor and leaning against the wall. He looked to be a beggar or vagrant. Beside him was a cat, or what appeared at first glance to be a cat, though far creepier looking.

It had large ears and large eyes, a tail that was split in two and skin that looked like rotting flesh.

(please refer to cover)

‘Excuse me can I borrow this?’ Waltz said to the man, grabbing the cat without waiting for a response.

The man didn’t react, he didn’t even seem to have heard.

Waltz hurried back to the desk with the cat under his arm.

‘There’ he said dumping it on the desk before the man.

‘Aww a little cat’ Sumaey cooed.

‘What is that?’ the official said raising an eyebrow.

‘Its...Emma....’ Waltz began. ‘I found her.’

‘I thought you said she was a girl with white hair’ the man said flatly.

‘Oh yeah! She is’ Waltz reassured him. ‘She has magic powers...she can turn into...that...’ he said, staring down with barely concealed disgust at the cat (he hated cats). ‘She is actually a princess...who...escaped her home...and she had magic powers’ he said again, ‘...and...um...she gets shy, that’s why she likes to turn into a cat. But this is really Emma. Yes it is’ he nodded enthusiastically.

The official sighed wearily.

‘Hey!’ his friend called again. ‘Last chance!’

‘One minute’ the man called tiredly. He looked back at the group before him, lifting his pen again. ‘Alright what are your names?’ he sighed.

Waltz’s expression lit up like a child’s on Christmas, he glanced towards Sumaey, he looked so happy he could cry.

‘I’m Waltz’ he said, as the official pulled out a form from one of the draws and began to fill it in.

‘Sumaey.’

‘Spirit.’

Loxus wagged his tail, unable to speak as he didn’t have a mouth (it would be rather an inconvenience to most people).

‘This is Loxus’ Sumaey offered, ‘and Graham’ she indicated the white stag.

The official’s eyes lingered for a moment on the stag.

‘A method of transport does not really count as a member of a guild’ he said, as Graham used the end of his horn to scratch his rear end.

‘We don’t use him for transport’ Sumaey argued. ‘He just carries our stuff. He used to be human until he was naughty, then a sorcerer turned him into this.’

‘Hmm-hmph.’ He hastily jotted this down. ‘And the cats name?’

‘Freak’ Waltz answered hastily.

The official did not pause in jotting this down.

‘And who is the leader of this new guild?’

‘I am’ Waltz sang loudly.

‘And as leader, what is your title?’

Waltz hesitated. He honestly hadn’t given it much thought. Every leader to a guild had a title, a second name by which they went by. Leroy’s (his old guild master) had been The Clockwork Man, though he had never asked why. Leroy had rarely used this name.

‘My title?’ he muttered.

‘Yes. Your title. What do you want it to be?’

Waltz thought for a moment.

‘The Slayer’ he spoke, in a quiet and dramatic voice.

‘*That* is the *lamest* name I’ve ever heard!’ Sumaey said instantly, sneering and rolling her eyes.

‘It’s perfect!’ Waltz breathed excitedly, beginning to tremble with happiness.

The strange cat sat down on the desk as the official made some final flourishing moves with his pen on the paper, pulling a stamp from his drawer and pressing it against the paper, before folding it up neatly and handing it to Waltz.

‘Congratulations’ the man droned, ‘...Slayer...you are now officially the leader of your new guild.’

Waltz leapt up into the air, unable to conceal his excitement as he punched a fist into the air. 'Finally!' he cried out as Sumaey beside him took the paper from the official and stared at it, reading through it idly. 'Finally!' Waltz said again as the official gathered the last of his things and left the desk.

'My very own guild...' Waltz sighed happily, hugging his hands over his heart with his eyes shimmering. '...This is the happiest day of my life...'

He grabbed Sumaey and Spirit either side of him, hugging them tightly to him.

Waltz cried out happily, as Spirit grimaced at being touched, and Sumaey looked as if she were about to hit him 'Look out world!' He declared. 'Here we come!'

Extra story

'I want to see the world' she admitted, 'and all the wonderful creatures in it. I want to test the limits of my powers, and see how strong a creature I am able to control with it, for even my father does not know.'

'Then why don't you?'

Emma raised her head, meeting Waltz's gaze.

'Responsibility' she answered.

'I have to go' Emma said, hearing her father call faintly from the guest house. 'My father is waiting for me.'

Emma turned and moved swiftly off, entering the guest house to see her father. It was in one of the quieter rooms upstairs that she found him.

'Emma' her father sighed happily, a smile spreading across his face. 'There you are. Who were those people you were talking to?'

Emma glanced out of the window at the strange band of five, moving away from the guest house as they headed to a nearby tavern to look for a job.

'They are just travellers' she answered.

'They look like guild members to me.'

She looked back at him.

'What did you want to see me for father?'

He reached towards her with a metallic hand, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear before stepping back.

'A friend of mine has been acting rather strangely' he began. 'He's become very secretive...he won't talk to me. I want you to go in my stead to see what is going on. I'm very worried about him.'

The fox that had accompanied Emma, curled up on the floor in the corner, tail over its nose, and began to sleep.

‘Me?’ Emma asked with confusion. ‘But why?’

‘He has a daughter a few years younger than you’ her father said, ‘...named Lillian.’

‘Lillian?’ Emma echoed, lifting her head as the name was familiar to her. ‘I know who she is.’

‘Yes’ her father nodded, moving away from her to stand by the window, his heavy footsteps from his false feet sounded loud on the floor, even through his boots. ‘I fear she may be in danger. Her father...my friend...is not himself. I do not know what has happened to him.’

Emma fell silent, mulling this over in her head.

‘Will you go for me?’ her father asked her. ‘Will you go to see if they are all alright? My friend and his family?’

‘Yes’ Emma replied. ‘I will.’

It was a dark and stormy night when Emma reached the house of her father’s friend, the rain lashed her as she went, and lightning forked through the sky.

She had used her father’s horse to travel, and as she reached the grand manor that was the home, she felt a cold premonition settling over her.

She tied the horse up outside in the barn near the stables, running for the home and entering the front door without knocking.

Finally when she was out of the rain, soaking wet and chilled to the bone, she called out.

‘Is anyone there?!’

It was at that moment the lightning flashed, and Emma saw a figure standing on the top of the tall flight of stairs.

The figure spoke.

‘It was an accident...’ he stammered. ‘I didn’t mean to do it.....I d-didn’t know what I was doing...’

And then Emma looked down, noticing the figure lying on the floor at the bottom of the stairs.

She ran forwards.

‘Lillian!’

The child was cold to the touch, and utterly still.

‘What have you done....?’ Emma whispered, staring down in shock.

And then she gasped, realising with horror that the girl was still alive.

‘....Emma....’ she sobbed, voice weak and trembling, ‘....is that you....?’

‘Hang on’ Emma told her urgently, ‘everything is going to be alright.’

She glanced up at the father, standing atop the stairs.

‘Don’t just stand there!’ she called up to him. ‘Help her! Do *something*!’

But he did move, transfixed where he was he stared down at the girls in shock.

At the base of the stairs, peering around the corner was a cat, a sphynx; with large eyes and ears, and naked fleshy pink skin.

Hidden in the shadows, it watched the scene unfold.

‘What are you doing?!’ Emma screamed. ‘Help her!’

Outside, the lightning cracked through the sky.

End of The Slayer Book One :)

After-Story Note

‘Boy that scene was a little dark to end the story like that’ Waltz noted.

‘Whatever makes her happy I suppose’ Sumaey replied flatly, folding her arms.

‘We hope you enjoyed this book’ Waltz said beaming, ‘it was written in a different style to the other books Lady Liliun has done so far. We hope it wasn’t too silly for you, and sorry if it’s a little short. It was originally intended to be a bit longer, but things didn’t turn out that way. Lady Liliun will not do fillers....unlike Bleach.’

‘Waltz are you going to stand there and yak all day?’ Sumaey asked moodily. ‘We’ve got a game of volleyball to play.’

Behind her Spirit, Loxus and Graham had already started, the strange cat-thing sat at the edge of the court, watching in silence.

‘I’m coming now’ Waltz said. He smiled. ‘This story is just the story to the story before the story began’ he said, lifting a second ball in his hands to begin a new game, as Graham had popped the first ball on his sharp horns. ‘We hope to see you in volume 2, Felix Let Loose, the second book in the Slayer series.’ He threw the ball over the net, where Sumaey was waiting for it.

‘Happy days!’